

2013

Healthy Hearts: A Collection

Healthy Hearts



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Lawson Road Church of Christ

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Healthy (spiritual) Hearts in 2013

TEXT: Read Luke 8:1-15.

By Peter Horne

The elders agreed to make the Lawson Road theme for 2013 **“Healthy Hearts”**.

It’s important in developing an annual theme that it not be too narrow. I learned that lesson when we went with [“You are God’s Building”](#) in 2008/09. It’s a good message, but difficult to maintain the creativity and freshness for a year.

“Healthy Hearts” certainly avoids this problem. The state of the heart and suggestions for caring for our hearts frequent the pages of Scripture. Although “Healthy Hearts” focuses on our individual relationship with God, healthy God-filled relationships with others demonstrate the healthy of our hearts. In God’s eyes a heart solely focused upon relating to God while ignoring interactions with others is anything but healthy. Loving God requires us to love others.



Since this is the first post relating to this theme, I thought I’d just list a few of the passages of Scripture relating to this idea. Then, as we go through the year we’ll cover some of these concepts in more depth.

- The pure in heart are blessed and will see God! (Matthew 5:8)
- A corrupt heart leads to corrupt behaviour. (Matthew 15:16-20, Luke 6:45)
- God wants us to love Him with all our heart... (Mark 12:33)
- In the Parable of the Soils the good soil represents an “honest and good heart”. (Luke 8:4-15)
- God can strengthen our hearts. (1 Thess. 3:13) I think this may become my benediction this year!
- God’s light shines in our hearts so we can shine it on others. (2 Cor. 4:6)
- We can “hide God’s word in our hearts”. (Psalm 110:11)
- Proverbs warns us to “Guard our hearts”. (Proverbs 4:23)
- Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Luke 12:34)
- God puts His Spirit in the hearts of his children. (2 Cor. 1:21-22)
- A hard heart is a terminal condition!

That’s just a few!

- **How would you describe a Healthy Heart?**
- **Do you have any favorite “heart” verses?**

Spiritual Health Checklist

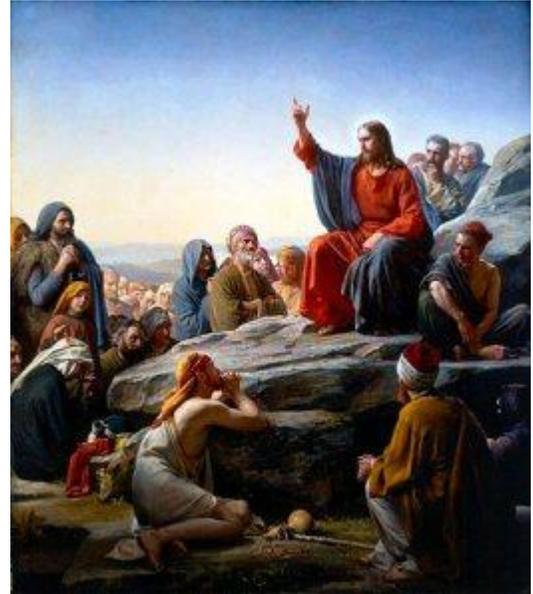
by Peter Horne

In the first quarter of 2013 I taught a series of Bible Classes from the Sermon on the Mount found in Matthew 5-7. Throughout the sermon Jesus makes a lot of comparisons, but in closing he challenges his listeners to make a choice, “build a solid life by following me, or choose your own path and risk your life falling apart. The choice is yours.” [My summary/paraphrase] This closing section contains four choices:

- Narrow or Wide Gate (v13-14)
- Good or Bad Fruit (v15-20)
- Hearers or Doers (v21-23)
- Wise or Foolish Builders (v24-27)

The Four Choices begin with a command “*Enter through the narrow gate.*” Will you obey it? Next he warns against deceptive teachers. Observe their lives, not their words.

Third, Jesus warns us not to deceive ourselves. Discipleship is revealed in the furnace, not the fireworks. Fourth, Jesus reiterates that the firm foundation is “Jesus words” and building on them requires action.



Like many sermons today, Jesus closed his sermon with an invitation: an invitation to follow him. As Jesus’ listeners heard this sermon, they had to make a decision, “Would they follow Jesus?” In reality, following Jesus requires more than a decision. He requires active obedience. So even if Jesus listeners accepted the invitation to follow Jesus, they still had to evaluate how consistently their lives matched the will of God.

In the context of the original sermon Matthew describes, the foundational teachings refer to the words of Jesus that the crowd has just heard. Since we now have a much larger canon of scripture than the original audience, we may choose to use other passages or collections of passages as a basis for evaluating our spiritual health. However, I believe that the Sermon on the Mount can provide an excellent guide for examining our commitment to Christ and his mission.

It’s crucial that we not deceive ourselves and build on sand instead of rock. We may have accepted Jesus invitation to follow him long ago, but we always need to reexamine the path we’re on. Are we hearing the words of Jesus? Are we doing the words of Jesus? (Matt. 7:24)

Based on Matthew chapters 5-7 here’s a little spiritual health checklist. Everyone’s different, but I recommend engaging a process like this at least twice a year.

I encourage you to find a quiet place to take this. Pray. Write down your answers using pen and paper. Share them with someone you can trust to encourage you as you take the necessary steps to improve your spiritual heart health.

1. How well do I know Jesus words?
 - When did I last study the Bible?
2. Would others describe me as humble, empathetic, meek and God-focused? (5:3-6)
 - Can I give an example?
3. Am I merciful, pure, and a promoter of peace in my dealings with others? (5:7-9)
 - Can I give an example?
4. Do I maintain the above character in the face of opposition? (5:10-12)
 - Can I give an example?
5. Do I represent God clearly to those outside the church? (5:13-16)
 - Can I give an example?
6. Do I pursue holiness of heart and hand, or do I rationalize my sins? (5:17-37)
 - What are my strongest temptations?
7. When did I last pray for my enemies?
 - Who are my enemies? (list them)
8. Is my church involvement for God's benefit, or to impress others? (6:1-23)
 - What was the last good deed I performed in secret?
9. Is there anyone in my life who's hurt me that I have not forgiven? (6:14)
 - Do I know of anyone who holds a grudge against me? Do I need to ask for forgiveness?
10. My biggest concern right now is.....
 - When did I last pray sincerely about this?
11. Do I invest more energy in the care of my soul, or talking about the souls of others? (7:1-12)
 - Who do I know right now that needs Christ in their life? When did I last pray for them?
12. Have I answered these questions diligently and honestly? (7:13-27)
 - Is the kingdom of God the greatest priority in my life?
 - Am I building my life of the rock? Am I doing the words of Jesus? (7:24)

May you draw closer to God and more deeply commit to his mission as you seek to live the life He has willed for you.

God Knows Your Heart

by Wes Woodell

INTRODUCTION: Wes first came to my attention when I was working in campus ministry in Louisiana. He organised a new summer workshop for campus ministers at Harding University and I called him to let him know I couldn't attend. 😊 Since then that workshop has blossomed into a ministry known as [Campus Ministry United](#), and their annual workshop brings in excellent speakers with a very evangelistic focus. I appreciate Wes' passion and love for God and people, and hope you find this article on the heart encouraging to your faith. ~Peter Horne

According to the Proverbs related to God's Wisdom & Sovereignty, God is sovereign over *everything*.

Stop – ruminate on that for a moment, because that idea has HUGE implications, and it's all too easy to read over without digesting.

God is sovereign over *everything*!

Ultimately, there is nothing outside the influence of God's power and control. This does not mean there are not certain things He cannot do, rather, it means there are many things He cannot do. For instance, God cannot make a mistake. God cannot speak untruth (by virtue of His saying something, it is true). God cannot be imperfect in any way.

We could add to this list, but you get the idea. God's sovereignty and power extends over all things, and Proverbs highlights many.

SOVEREIGN OVER THE HEART

The Bible makes it clear the LORD's vision into the hearts of men is pure and piercing, but just what is the heart?

In our culture, most think of the heart as the seat of emotion. Phrases like, "I love you with all of my heart" are descriptive of how we emotionally *feel* about another person, but in the Bible, the heart is much more than that.

The Hebrew word translated "heart" in the Old Testament is *Lev*, and it shows up close to 900 times in various forms. It can refer to 1) a person's physical heart (the blood pumping organ of the body), 2) the physical mid-section of a person, or 3) a person's inner self. More often than not option #3 – the inner self (i.e. inner person, mind, soul, spirit, will) – is what is meant.

The inner self is not simply the seat of one's emotions – it includes that, but is not limited to it. The biblical concept of "heart" refers not only to feelings, but also to one's thoughts, volitions, and motivations.

Simply put, the Old Testament concept of "heart" refers to who you are on the inside that no one else can see.

You've heard the old saying, "Home is where the heart is", but that saying is misleading.



The truth is, “The *heart* is where the home is”, because your “heart” is where you really live, and no one else can *really* come in. People may catch glimpses of your true heart here and there, and those you are closer to will have more knowledge of your true heart than others, but even your best friend or spouse will never fully know your *true* heart – no one else but you really will.

No one else, that is, except for God.

IN YOUR BUSINESS

Whether you like it or not, and as I’ve heard college students say, God is “all up in your business.”

Proverbs teaches this truth, and it’s found throughout the rest of the Bible too.

In 1 Samuel 16:7b, God told Samuel that He had decided to make David the nation of Israel’s next king because He sees much more than the human eye – God sees the inner self of a man:

“The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart [inner self].”

David knew this truth well, and passed it on to his son Solomon (who would later write most of the book of Proverbs) in 1 Chronicles 28:9:

“And you, my son Solomon, acknowledge the God of your father, and serve him with wholehearted devotion and with a willing mind, for the LORD searches every heart [all of the inner self] and understands every motive behind the thoughts. If you seek him, he will be found by you; but if you forsake him, he will reject you forever.”

No matter how much we might like to hide it, Proverbs 20:27 (in addition to many other Proverbs) teaches that the light of the Lord will illuminate every facet of our inner selves:

“The lamp of the LORD searches the spirit of a man; it searches out his inmost being.”

Nothing is hidden from the LORD’s sight, human hearts included.

GOD’S SOVEREIGNTY EQUALS PERFECT JUDGMENT

As a result of God’s perfect knowledge, we can expect God to be perfect in administering judgment and justice.

Since the LORD knows all, His reward will be according to a perfect standard.

As Jeremiah 17:10 says:

“I the LORD search the heart [inner self] and examine the mind [inmost being], to reward a man according to his conduct, according to what his deeds deserve.”

Reward is in God’s hand, and it will be meted out according to His perfect knowledge.

This concept is repeated in the New Testament. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 4:4b-5:

“It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men’s hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God.”

There will come a day when we are completely laid bare – thoughts, actions, and motives – for all to see. Better to get your house in order now through the power of the Holy Spirit than to wait until that day to be exposed!

Lastly, 1 John 3:19-21 says:

“This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God ...”

“For God is greater than our hearts, and *He knows everything* ...”

When it comes to judgment, it will be our hearts that acquit us or condemn us.

It is the heart – the inner self, the person we are on the inside that no one besides God can see – that will acquit us or condemn us, because our inner selves – who we are at the core of our being – is what God expects to be in submission to Jesus.

Anyone can fake externals, and, frankly, many do, but when it comes to the heart, no one can “fake it” before God. He sees the *real* you, and will judge the *real* you according to His just and perfect standard.

Where is your heart?

CONCLUSION

Isn't it wonderful to know that God is good? Isn't it wonderful to know that He's just and kind and loving, and has our best interests in mind?

God is for us, not against us, and we should both take comfort in and be challenged by the words of Proverbs 30:5 and 3:5-6:

“Every word of God is flawless; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him.”

And:

“Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.”

Wise words to be heeded and applied.

Wes currently resides in O'Fallon, MO where he, his wife, and their four children have joined other members of [The Crossings Church](#) in preparation to plant a new congregation the Greater St Louis area. Before moving to Missouri, the Woodells lived in San Francisco, CA where they established a campus ministry and were active in evangelistic outreach. Wes earned his BMin from Harding University in Searcy, AR, and is in the final hours of completing his first graduate degree from Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, CA. You can read more of Wes' writing on his blog: <http://outoftheoverflow.com/>.

You might also like to continue the conversation by addressing these questions:

- **“The Heart” is obviously a metaphor. Wes gave a definition above. How would you describe it to someone?**
- **How do you feel about God knowing your heart? Is it comforting or intimidating?**
- **If God knowing your heart allows him to administer perfect justice, do you trust God to make the right judgment about your life?**

Sabbath: A Spiritual Discipline (part 1)

by Peter Horne

TEXT: Hebrews 3:16-4:13.

Should Christians observe the Sabbath? I attended a small Baptist high school that believed Sunday is the Sabbath. I remember a friend getting chewed out on a school trip for buying some chewing gum on a Sunday. Seventh Day Adventists believe Christians should continue to observe the Saturday Sabbath as the Old Testament describes. So what are we to do?

The Sabbath has a couple of curious attributes that have made it a polarising debate topic as the positions described above illustrate. All my life I have been taught that Christians do not need to observe the Sabbath as it is the only one of the 10 Commandments not explicitly repeated in the New Testament. BUT, it is also the only one of the 10 Commandments included as part of God’s creative work in Genesis 1.

Here’s a little table I’ve put together to provide a rough interpretative matrix by comparing the Hebrew practices of Sabbath and tithing and how the church interacted with them. I recognise that some of the points are a little strained and the match with tithing is not exact, but I hope it demonstrates how we can retain principles from the Mosaic Law while dispensing with the details.

	TITHE	SABBATH
Precedes Sinai Law	Abraham (Genesis 14:17-20)	Creation (Genesis 2:2-3)
Codified at Sinai	Deuteronomy 14:22-29	Exodus 20:8-11
About the Heart (<i>These verses describe ungodly motives.</i>)	Amos 4:4	Amos 8:4-5
Jesus affirmed the principle	Give to God (Matt 22:21)	Lord of the Sabbath (Matt 12:8)
Adapted by the church	cheerful giver (2 Cor. 9:7)	Eternity = Sabbath-rest (Heb 4:9)

At this point I want to define my understanding of the Christian principle of sabbath. I do not believe that God commands Christians to take a particular day of the week and avoid all work on that day. Rather, I believe God intends for his people to integrate periods (lunch breaks, or entire days or weeks) of sabbath-rest into our lives. The simplest distinction I can make is that the capital changes to a lower-case “s”. Christians do not need to observe all the Sabbath rituals described in the Mosaic Law, but we can extract enough principles from that holy day to still describe our practice as “sabbath”.

In creation we find rest at the core of Sabbath. On the seventh day God rested. In Exodus 20 the 10 Commandments provide some commentary, “...he rested on the seventh day. Therefore he blessed the Sabbath day...”. The Sabbath is synonymous with rest.

However, it would be wrong to focus entirely upon rest without also considering how sabbath impacts our relationship with God. Over time, the Israelite practice of Sabbath increasingly included components of personal and organised worship. So when I define or describe the concept of sabbath-rest for the church I can’t think of a better place to begin than with the example of Jesus.



Mark 1:21-34 contains one description of Jesus’ Sabbath. Note the various elements:

- v21 – attend synagogue and teach [study] the Scripture;
- v23 – respond compassionately [exorcise] to a person in need;
- v29 – return home;
- v30 – respond compassionately [heal] to a person in need;
- v30 – spend the afternoon eating and fellowshiping;
- v32 – after the conclusion of Sabbath at 6pm, Jesus again begins his public ministry of healing and casting out demons.

In her book *Rest: Living in Sabbath Simplicity* Keri Kent points out that since the Jewish Sabbath begins on Friday evening, it begins with food, fellowship and rest, followed in the morning by more structured worship. We see all of these in the passage above. Sabbath provides an opportunity to restore our souls by creating space to:

1. Rest;
2. Love God through the practice of other spiritual disciplines; and
3. Love others by prioritising time with people over time fulfilling tasks.

In **Mark 3:27** Jesus made the famous statement that, “*The Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath.*” In my experience many Christians have taken this to mean that sabbath is an optional practice that we can disregard if it gets in the way of the rest of our schedule. When we adopt this attitude, we really read the verse as saying, “*The Sabbath was made for your convenience, not to get in the way of your scheduled life.*” Nothing could be further from Jesus’ intent!

In this verse Jesus makes the point that God made Sabbath for the benefit of people. When we dismiss it, or crowd it out of our lives we reject God’s gracious gift. Part of Jesus criticism toward the Pharisees related to their elaborate list of rules regarding the Sabbath that actually made it a chore to keep rather than a blessing. However we choose to integrate sabbath into our lives we must keep it beneficial rather than a drudgery.

On some occasions sabbath-rest may mean gardening, or just breaking from the busyness of life to relax and refresh. For other people their sabbath-rest may involve intentional time communing with God.

Others will best experience sabbath around a table with friends or a board game with family. At its most basic goal sabbath does not concern how we fill that time, but what we leave behind.

To gain maximum benefit from sabbath-rest we need to make it intentional. Sabbath is not just a “mental-health day”, or a lazy day bumming around in our PJ’s. Just as many people take a day off work for Memorial Day without remembering anything, the temptation exists to take a sabbath with zero intentionality. Sabbath should draw us closer to God while restoring and equipping us for whatever comes next.

In *God on Monday* Benny Tabalujan summarises Watchmen Nee’s book *Sit, Walk, Stand* which is a study in the book of Ephesians. He writes,

We are first called to rest and sit with Christ (Ephesians 2:6); then we are exhorted to walk in a manner worth of Christ’s calling (Ephesians 4:1); and finally we are roused to stand firm against the evil one (Ephesians 6:11). Implicit in this is the proposition that if I am not first rested and comfortable in my new identity in Christ, then I will not be able to draw on his strength to walk righteously or to fight against evil valiantly. Or, to put it in another way, being precedes doing and rest precedes work. (Tabalujan, 37)

Our culture makes it increasingly difficult for us to rest and refresh ourselves. We see this demonstrated in the familiar comment, “I need a holiday to help me get over my holiday.” We often return from our vacations which we intended as renewing retreats only to find ourselves in about the same place we were before we left. Our consumer culture entices us to cram as much as possible into any time we have available. Tabalujan provides this helpful table to illustrate the distinction between sabbath-rest and leisure.

	Biblical Rest	Modern Leisure
Dominant activity	Reflection	Consumption
Impact on person	Restorative	Tiring
Relationship to work	Gives meaning to	Provides escape from

Finally, I want to close by summarising sabbath over the scope of Scripture.

- God created sabbath-rest at Creation. If it’s good enough for God we should not dismiss it too quickly.
- God codified the sabbath at Sinai.
- Jesus clarified the sabbath during his ministry removing the burdensome obligations and restoring its original purpose.
- The church looks forward to an eternal sabbath-rest with God. (**Hebrews 3:16-4:13**)

God’s intends for his people to experience rest. Yes, in this life we also participate in the mission of God, but we equip ourselves for that mission first through rest. Then we have eternal rest as the goal of God’s mission. That’s not to say eternity will promote laziness. Rather, God’s promise provides relief from sin, and rest from turmoil and chaos.

Sabbath: A Spiritual Discipline (part 2)

by Peter Horne

Richard Foster in *Celebration of Discipline* provides a list of spiritual disciplines that have become a pretty standard list. He groups them three ways:

- **Inward:** Meditation; prayer; fasting; study.
- **Outward:** Simplicity; solitude; submission; service.
- **Corporate:** Confession; worship; guidance; celebration.

I don't think Foster would claim that this list is exhaustive, but as I say, it's become standard. For example, other authors often list "silence" separate from "solitude". Dallas Willard in *The Spirit of Discipline* includes disciplines such as frugality, chastity and fellowship in his discussion of spiritual disciplines.

I find it interesting that neither of these respected authors discuss "sabbath" as a distinct spiritual discipline. I hope to use this post to argue that sabbath-rest, although related to other disciplines, should be valued as a distinct discipline in its own right.

Sometimes we Gentiles might assume that Sabbath becomes a matter of routine for Jews and therefore simpler for them to give up one day per week. This perception may contain some truth, but **Amos 8:4-5** describes an attitude consistent with our times, "*When will the Sabbath be ended that we may market wheat?*" Sabbath-rest clashes with our culture's emphases on consumption, efficiency, productivity and time management. A popular book from 2000 captures this tension well with the title *Having a Mary Heart in a Martha World* in reference to the events found in **Luke 10:38-42**.

A recent CNBC article made the statement "*There's little arguing that the concept of Sabbath is in serious danger.*" The article discusses how technology has helped work intrude into our lives in never previously imagined ways. "*It took labor unions 100 years to fight for nights and weekends off, some say, while smartphones took them away in about three years.*" According to some research the average smartphone user checks her phone every six minutes. Additionally, "*government data from 2011 says 35 percent of us work on weekends, and those who do average five hours of labor, often without compensation—or even a thank you.*" We have come to associate busyness with importance.

The pull from culture to adopt its values is intense. Choosing another path requires discipline. We require discipline not to check work email on our days off. We require discipline not to interrupt game night with the kids to run another load of laundry. We require discipline to rise early to abide with God without checking the overnight sports scores. We require discipline to establish a tech-free family meal focused on our relationship with God. We require discipline to build "down time" into our week, or to dedicate a day such as Sunday to personal renewal. Is this why the Sabbath command was necessary, because rest does not come naturally to us?

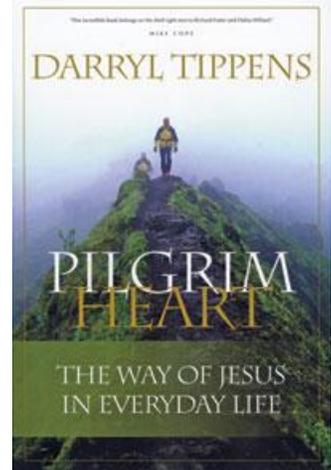
When many of us think of sabbath our thoughts gravitate toward solitude and silence. These are distinct disciplines that may occur during a time of sabbath but they do not capture the full scope of sabbath. In her book *Rest: Living in Sabbath Simplicity* Keri Kent discusses 6 aspects of practicing sabbath-rest:

1. **Rest** – learning to be still and reducing stress;
2. **Reconnecting** – in both Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy the 10 Commandments apply sabbath rest to everyone in the household, even animals. Sabbath is an inclusive event that flattens the social hierarchy.
3. **Revising** – refers to examining our priorities. What is more important than sabbath, really? What parts of our lives do we need to rearrange to make sabbath-rest possible?
4. **Pausing** – references small moments throughout our week where we accept interruptions as opportunities for spiritual growth. Is my task more important than this person? Pausing also encourages to interrupt ourselves at times to contemplate the wonders of the ordinary around us.
5. **Playing** – extrovert personalities find refreshment through interacting with people more so than quiet contemplation. Sabbath-rest legalism should not prevent us from pursuing refreshing activities.
6. **Praying** – meets the sabbath-rest goals of rest, loving God, and loving others.

In 2006 Church of Christ author Darryl Tippens published a book titled *Pilgrim Heart* in which he describes 15 “practices” for aiding our journey with Jesus. He dedicates two of those chapters to discussing sabbath-rest. He describes “*Sabbath as a wonderful benefit and blessing to humanity that our culture greatly needs. Sabbath — which I use broadly to signify rest, “down time,” quiet, renewal, recreation, getting away — can occur any day of the week. It can be even a part of a busy day.*”

Tippens presents his discussion in the form of 8 paradoxical “beatitudes” that I’ll attempt to summarise here:

1. **Retreat** – Retreat from the world is one of the best ways to serve others. Times set apart for silence, reflection, prayer and other forms of worship can permanently change our understanding of our mission and our relationship to the world.
2. **Rest** – Rest is not a burden, but a life-giving gift and joyous freedom.
3. **Play** – Part of our weariness results not from the weight of our work but from the dreary joylessness of our working lives. We should respect leisure as an intrinsic good.
4. **Embrace Imperfection** – The point is not to endorse uncaring or sloppy work, but to call us to be strategic with our limited resources.
5. **Slow** – I cultivate patience by deliberately choosing to place myself in positions where I have to wait.
6. **Create Boundaries** – ‘Multi-tasking’ may be a virtue in certain limited settings, but it is disastrous as a way of life because it means that no one thing [or person] ever receives our total devotion.
7. **Say “No”** – In the midst of the tsunamis of life, one cannot enjoy the luxury of retreat from the fray. Still, not everything that calls to us is a crisis. It takes careful discernment to determine when to say no.
8. **Connect** – Time spent in authentic community is also a kind of Sabbath rest.



I've quoted heavily from other sources because I'm certainly no expert on the topic of sabbath-rest or even much of a practitioner. Yet it seems to me that integrating sabbath-rest into our lives is one way God calls his people to be counter cultural. God no longer *demand*s that we cease work for a specific 24 hour period, but he graciously teaches us to value rest as way of preparing His mission.

Some traditions regard sabbath as a fast. Others view sabbath as a time of feasting: a joyful celebration. A healthy practice of sabbath will integrate both elements into our lives. The 10 Commandments have often been divided between the first two focused on loving and worshiping God and the last six that guide our relationships with our neighbours. In this way they help Israel fulfill the great commands of loving God and neighbour. But the third command to keep the Sabbath doesn't fit neatly into this division unless we see it as a transitional merging of the two.

Exodus 20:10 calls the seventh day "*a sabbath to the Lord your God.*" Clearly it is God focused. Yet just as clearly it benefits neighbours as the householder cannot delegate work to children, servants, guests, or even animals. All people are to experience sabbath-rest equally. In this way sabbath-rest is both a God-focused fast and a communal experience. We may not enjoy both elements at the same moment, but our overall experience of sabbath should seek both fasting and feasting.

In some ways the use of the word sabbath confuses us due to its association with the formal practices of Judaism. Perhaps another way of thinking about this topic is to develop a theology of rest. Does your understanding of God really require Him to rest? Or does your image of God have him continually in motion? If our Christian journey is a process of being transformed into the image of God, then we must transform our schedules to enable the pursuit of refreshment and renewal in a theology of rest.

Antidotes for a Proud Heart

by Peter Horne

In his excellent book [Humilitas](#) Australian minister and academic John Dickson proposes several means of cultivating humility in our lives. I'll share a couple of those and then throw in a few suggestions of my own.

1. **We are shaped by what we love.**

If we find ourselves struggling with pride, we probably don't value/love humility. Combating pride requires learning to value humility. Notice humble people and imitate them. Study what makes them humble and make appropriate adjustments in your own life.

2. **Pay attention to others.**

Pride involves an obsession or love of self. If we deliberately move the focus of our lives away from self we reduce pride. Jesus taught us this process in Matthew 22:35-37 when he gave the Greatest Command, "Love God" and the Second Command, "Love your neighbour as yourself." If we can genuinely rank God first in our lives and others equal with self we will find ourselves closer to humility than pride.

3. **Practice obedience.**

Bonhoeffer in *Cost of Discipleship* describes obedience as the most fundamental step of discipleship to Christ. Obedience requires submission to a higher authority. Jesus himself gives an example according to Philippians 2:8 "*He humbled himself by becoming obedient to death...*".

4. **Focus your thoughts on the gifts God has given you.**

Scripture regularly reminds us that God gives us salvation as a gracious gift. (Romans 6:23) We're also told several times that our talents and abilities that distinguish us from each other are actually gracious gifts from God. In Romans 12:3-8 Paul begins by warning Christians "*Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought...*" then goes on to list the gifts God gives his people. When we accept this reality we will have less reason to take pride in any of our accomplishments.

5. **Develop a habit of gratitude.**

Gratitude naturally promotes humility. As we cultivate an attitude of thankfulness we will increasingly appreciate the contributions God and others make to our successes.

6. **Learn to forgive.**

The connection between forgiveness and humility may not jump off the screen at you. Think of it this way. The opposite of forgiveness is judgment. Judgment often involves an air of superiority. "I'm right and you're wrong." Or maybe, "I'm wrong, but you're wrong-er". Forgiveness means letting go of the right to be right. It allows others to sin without thinking less of them. We don't keep count of their sins, because we know the length of our own shortcomings. Consider the parable of The Pharisee and the Tax Collector ([Luke 18:9-14](#)). Imagine how different the story would read if the Pharisee had wondered over to the tax collector and said, "You've hurt people I care about, but I'm glad you're here today and I for one forgive you." No pride, just forgiveness and humility.

7. **Forget about being humble.**

If we attempt to increase our humility we still focus on ourselves. The more we invest in the lives of others, serve others, and love others humility will naturally follow us. But if we make humility a focus of our lives how are we going to measure our progress without again becoming proud in the process? It's much better to serve others because we love them than because we want to reduce our pride.

Why Your Spiritual Health Matters

By Keith Roberts

Why does spiritual health matter? What is spiritual health, anyway? And why do so many Christ-followers struggle with it?

According to Scripture, we're made up of spirit, soul and body:

"May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." (1 Thess. 5:23 NIV)

"For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart." (Hebrews 4:12 NIV)

This means that you ARE a spirit, housed in a body and interacting in this finite world as a "soul". If your life is controlled by the body, you'll become obsessed with either abuse of the body (gluttony, sexual immorality, addictions, etc.) or obsessed with physical culture (exercise, your appearance, diet, clothing, etc.).

If your life is controlled by the soul, you'll emphasize emotional well-being, education, the arts, entertainment, success, etc.

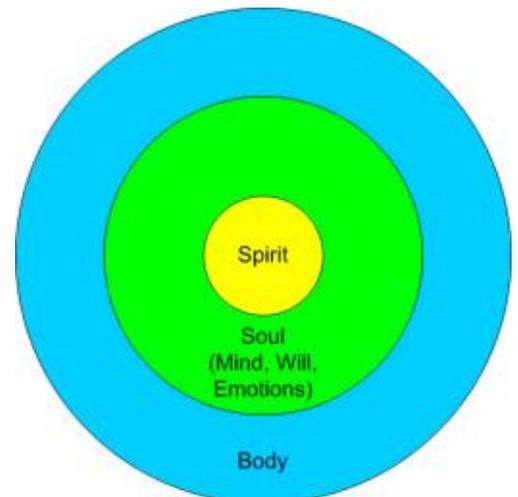
But if your *spirit* reigns, then Scripture, fellowship with other believers, true worship, prayer, etc. will dominate your life. And along with this, the fruit of the Holy Spirit will manifest, becoming the prominent feature of your personality (Galatians 5:16-25).

So, here's why spiritual health is vitally important: If your spirit is weak and anemic, your soul and body will ascend to the throne and dictate the direction of your life. When that happens, disaster follows. Such people fill our churches. They're self-oriented and world-oriented but not God-conscious.

Example: Demas had the honor of working directly with the Apostle Paul, who labeled him one of his "fellow workers" (Philemon 1:24). Yet later Paul writes about him, "Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and has gone to Thessalonica." (2 Timothy 4:10 NIV) The English phrase "this world" comes from the Greek "this present age". Demas' body and his world-oriented soul had crowded out the influence of his spirit, and of the Holy Spirit.

Example: When the Apostle Paul wrote to a church in deep trouble, he diagnosed the members as spiritually anemic. His evidence? - chronic division in the congregation.

"And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to infants in Christ. I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not yet able to receive it. Indeed, even now you are not yet able, for you are still fleshly. For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly,



and are you not walking like mere men?" (1 Corinthians 3:1-3 NASB). (Scripture often calls the tandem tyrants of body and soul “the flesh” or “the carnal man”.)

So, we cure these issues by improving spiritual health – through prayer, Scripture and fellowship with other believers, keeping us linked to His Divine Spirit and glorious Presence.

Keith Roberts has been a Preaching Minister since 1975 and has preached for the Calhoun Church of Christ (Louisiana) since 1981. He is also an elder in the church. Keith is a graduate of Whites Ferry Road Preaching School and later served and instructor at the school (1985-92). He has taught over 100 prayer seminars in various churches & lecturships. He recently published a book, “Why God Waits”. Info on the book is available at www.WhyGodWaits.com.

Questions of the Heart

By James T. Wood

Growing up in church, I was taught that certainty, not cleanliness, is what's next to godliness. From the pulpit to the Sunday school classroom, we were told that we could be sure of our faith. It came as a surprise to me, then, when I discovered the many of the heroes of faith in the bible have struggled with questions.

For me it started with a distraught father. He was completely at his wits' end. He'd tried everything up to this point and nothing had worked. He wanted what was best for his son, but it seemed like he couldn't ever get there. Failure after failure left him crushed. One more offer of hope seemed like a cruel joke that he just couldn't resist. Faith was worn, frayed, and close to breaking. In a desperate, lonely moment he let the words slip out of his heart before his brain could stop them: "I do believe, help my unbelief."

You might recognize the words from Mark 9, but, if you're like me, you also recognize them from your own frayed, broken moment when the hope that you've been clinging to seems to slip away. You find yourself speaking nonsense. You and I mix belief and unbelief, faith and doubt, certainty and questions.

But, if you're like me, you feel guilty about it. You question your questioning and doubt your doubting. We grew up being taught that there's no higher goal than spiritual certainty so our doubts, fears, and questions must be wrong. Right?

But that's not how Jesus treats this poor, beleaguered father in his moment of confession. He's not condemned as a sinner for expressing doubt, his son is healed and his life is transformed. Jesus, the man who flipped tables in the temple, defiantly healed on the Sabbath, and called out the religious leaders as hypocrites, was not afraid of confronting sin. He never flinched from a righteous conflict and didn't excuse people from doing wrong, even in the midst of forgiving them. But he doesn't forgive the unbelieving father – no, instead he just heals the son.

Once I started to see it, I couldn't avoid it. Scripture is filled with faithful people who question God. Elijah, immediately after miraculously defeating the prophets of Ba'al, runs away into the wilderness. There he meets God in a still, small whisper and confesses that he's done. He's afraid for his life and he's ready to give up.

Or look at David who cried out to God in heartbreaking songs that were penned when he was pretending to be insane, or hiding in a cave, or cradling his dead son, or hiding from his usurping son. David threw his questions into the teeth of God with poetic power and those songs became the hymnal of Israel.

One of David's songs came up again – a heartbreaking question thrown at the Almighty for generations – "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Jesus, on the cross, echoes David and questions God.

Jesus questioned God.

Let that sink in for a bit. If you've felt guilty for your doubts, if you've questioned your questioning and feared your lack of faith, you're following Jesus in this.

Jesus prayed for God to do something, anything different. Have you prayed that prayer? When the test came back positive? When the marriage didn't survive? When you pulled on your black dress clothes for the funeral? When the collectors kept calling? When you lost your job?

God, why can't you do something else? If it's possible, let this cup pass from me. Take it away. Choose any other path. Please.

Jesus shows us that questioning God isn't bad, it's healthy. David did it, Elijah did it, Job did it, Habakkuk did it, Gideon did it, Abraham did it, Moses did it, and those are just a few of the stories. The bible is filled with tale after tale of people who blurt out in pain, confusion, and passion: "I believe, help my unbelief."

Is that you? I know it's been me.

When God responds to these questions, he's not mad. He doesn't rebuke or condemn the faithful-doubting of his people. Job's answer was that God is in control. Gideon's answer was that he should fight for God's people. Elijah's answer was that he wasn't alone. David's answer was to praise God anyway.

The questions don't yield an explanation of God's plan, but they draw our heart closer to the heart of God. When we lay everything, even our doubts, at the feet of God we get those Romans 8 moments:

"In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans."

James T Wood is a writer, minister, and teacher in Portland, Oregon. He and his wife Andrea have worked with established churches and church plants all over the US. You can find out more about James and what he's up to at www.jamestwood.com.

The Overflow of The Heart

By Caleb Borchers

Have you ever bought a new product of some kind and been smitten with it? Do you find yourself showing off that new cell phone a little too much? Or do you find yourself wearing that same new shirt at every social event you attend? Would your friends say that you just will not shut up about your new minivan? Sometimes we just get excited about the latest, coolest toy that we have purchased.

I will confess that I am often guilty of this sort of enthusiasm when it comes to my technological love: Macs. I'm generally enthralled with all things Apple. My MacBook has served me well for four years now, and I hope to get a few more years out of it. I have an iPhone and find it enables a lot of my ministry, particularly when I am on the road. My wife has an iPad she received as a Christmas Gift a few years back. I like to steal it. And if you give me the opportunity, I will tell you why I think these products are superior to other electronics. In my more cynical moments I will tell you why your computer freezes and is riddled with viruses, and mine never is. I'll tell you why my tech runs faster and smoother than yours. Generally, I'll be completely obnoxious.

The truth is, when our hearts are full of excitement and joy they naturally overflow in our words and actions. Jesus made this clear in a discussion he had with the teachers of the law. In **Matthew 12:34** he says "The mouth speaks what the heart is full of" or as some of us remember from the KJV, "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh." Many of us have something on the tip of our tongues. I've discussed the latest consumer products, but maybe it's the new TV show you love or book you've read. Maybe it's the new baby you've had. Maybe it's the political issue you think you should champion. Whatever it is, many of us have something that we are quick to speak about.

What does it say when the Good News isn't close to the tip of our tongues? After all, it isn't called the "Good News" for nothing. The Gospel should be this life altering message that shakes our foundations every morning. It should change our core and fill our hearts with hope. Yet the church spends millions of dollars and hours every year trying to get us educated enough or excited enough to share our faith. Many (most?) of us have so little experience in telling others about God's work in the world. Even those of us who are capable evangelists tend to share a curriculum or tract more than the overflowing of our hearts.

My point here is not to create guilt. For far too much of my life I was caught in these cycles of guilt and guilt appeasement when it came to evangelism. I'd read a passage or hear a sermon about sharing faith and feel terrible that I hadn't done so. So I'd try to find some sort of program or activity or class about the topic. At this point I'd feel the guilt subside. I mean, I took a class, what more do you want me to do? And so I would return to regular life and not think about it again until another conscience pricking moment. I am suspicious that I am not alone in this experience. Is this a helpful way for us to go about dealing with Jesus call to us in the Great Commission? I don't think so.

Instead, I think we have to really look at heart transformation. We don't have an evangelism problem in the church today, we have a heart problem. If the Good News was the "abundance of our

hearts” it would also be on our tongues. Here are a couple of ways I think this problem manifests itself and ways to deal with those problems:

- **We don't really feel saved from anything.** In his great book on evangelism “*Just Walk Across the Room,*” Bill Hybels suggests that everyone should have a simple before and after story of their life. This is who I was before Christ, and after Christ I am now this way. God has transformed my life. Hybels, who grew up in church, recognizes this activity is hard for those that grew up in church. That doesn't make it any less necessary. We believe that everyone, even people that grew up around religion, have to convert. They have to put on Christ at baptism. And that baptism means something. What does it mean for you? How was your life changed? What has God given you by extending his grace? Can you formulate a simple explanation of how God has transformed you since you came to him in baptism? If we cannot put this into words, what can we really offer to others?

- **We assume others are too lost.** That isn't a terribly biblical way to talk about things, is it? But we do it all the time. We do not talk to a co-worker or neighbor or fellow parent because “they wouldn't be interested.” “They would never come to church.” “They would never study the Bible.” We have two problems here. The first is that we are saying “no” for someone else. How do we know unless we ask? Why are we an authority on how someone else thinks? The second one is the subtle arrogance we display in these comments. In effect we say, “I'm a good/smart/righteous/humble/etc enough person that I will listen to God's call, but my neighbor is too pagan/evil/stupid/arrogant/etc to take up faith.”

A far more theologically accurate thought is, “If God could save me, surely he could save my neighbor!” No one should be considered too far gone for God to reach.

- **Our faith is of minimal importance to our life.** The joy of knowing God is choked out by the joy or pain we have in our latest home improvement project or relationship or financial issue or whatever else is going on. We just have no space in our hearts for God. This is where spiritual disciplines like prayer and Scripture reading are important. They help clear out the space in our hearts, eliminating the junk.

A foundational text for our ministry in Rhode Island is the Parable of the Great Banquet in Luke 14. In that parable Jesus deals with some of these issues. The original guests did not understand the value of their invitation. Their hearts were too full of other things like their marriages or fields. In the end, the table is full of people that no one would expect to see at the table. God's messengers are told not to overlook anyone, they do not stop themselves from inviting anyone. The master simply must have his table full, and will continue to search high and low for people to come, sit, and feast.

Caleb Borchers is the lead church planter at The Feast, a new Church of Christ in Providence RI. Caleb, his wife Fran, and his two daughters have been in Rhode Island for three years now, completing an apprenticeship with the Blackstone Valley Church of Christ in Cumberland before moving into Providence to plant a church. The main focus of the Borchers' apprenticeship and ministry has been how to communicate the good news of Jesus to 21st century people with little or no exposure to Christianity.

Caleb grew up in Detroit MI. He has a BA from [Harding University](#) and an MDiv from the [Harding School of Theology](#). The Feast is part of the [Kairos Church Planting network](#), a group of men and women striving to plant new churches, in new places, for new people. You can bless Kairos' work to reach new people by joining the Kairos Prayer Network at www.kairosprayer.org.

Healthy Hearts and Good Soil

By Shane Coffman

I had heard the parable a thousand times. You probably have, too.

The sower went out to sow his seed. Some seed fell on the path, where it was either trampled or the birds came and ate the seed before it had any chance to sprout. Some seed fell on rocky soil, and although it sprouted, its lifespan was short because it had no roots. Other seed fell among the thorns, and found itself choked out by its surroundings. The rest of the seed fell among good, rich soil - a friendly environment which allowed it to grow and reproduce.

The problem was that I had always considered this parable to apply only to when a person first hears the good news of Jesus. Some shrug it off, others accept but quickly fall away, others accept but slowly fade away, and others, like myself of course, were the good soil that accepted the Word and produced fruit for the Sower. I had passed the test. My soil (heart) was good.

Fortunately, one day God opened my ears to hear the rest of the story.

He said the seed is the Word of God.

That means anytime - no, **every** time, I find myself engaged in a study of the Bible or a time of worship with fellow believers, I have the potential to be any one of those four kinds of soil.

I must confess there have been times when I have heard the Word and have let it go in one ear and out the other. Times when a passage or a song have been so familiar that it was as if I was on auto pilot, repeating the words without allowing their message to sink in at all. Times when I've arrived on Sunday or Wednesday having already made up my mind that I was going to be bored and disengaged. Times I didn't like the song leader or song selections, or I didn't like the speaker or the text for that day, and thus checked out mentally. Times when I allowed the way someone dressed or the way someone spoke to distract me from their message. Times when I allowed my frustration with the whole set of unwritten and extra-Biblical rules of "church" keep me from finding the good in it at all. My heart has been the path - difficult, if not impossible, to penetrate.

At other times, I have been convicted and resolved to make changes to my life to conform to God's desires for me, only to go back to my old habits by sun down. Times I have taken in an awe-inspiring message only to be unable to retell anything about it the next day at work. Times I have failed to commit to memory or to heart anything I heard. Times I have remembered the catchy tune, but not the rich message of the lyrics. My heart was the rocky soil - shallow and unfriendly to the seed.

Indeed, there have been other times when I was truly changed by what I experienced from God, yet over time I could not maintain the enthusiasm for holiness because I also coveted the trappings of Satan. I was able to live like a “good Christian” when I was at church, but I couldn’t keep it up at work or at school. My heart was choked by thorns. I was trying to serve two masters.

My goal, however, is that every time I gather with other disciples or break open the Word of God, my heart will be the good soil. Undistracted. Open. Allowing plenty of sunlight and moisture for growth and maturing into a branch that produces fruit a hundred times more than what was sown. I desire for my heart to take in every good word and apply it to myself and my own life before applying it to others. I desire to feast on the message of every song in order that I might learn more about Him and be equipped to give thanks and praise in all situations. I want to have a GOOD heart. Noble. Truthful.

How about you? What will the condition of your heart look like the next time you gather with brothers and sisters in Christ? It’s your choice.

What kind of soil will the seed find inside you?

Shane Coffman is simply a follower of Jesus who calls Owasso, Oklahoma his home. He is a husband to Alice and a daddy to Ada. Shane serves in the kingdom as worship minister for the Memorial Drive Church of Christ in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and helps direct The Tulsa Workshop each March. His passion is to help people connect with God and see Him in their everyday life, and to help them have a song in their heart of praise to Him.

Guard Your Heart

By Kevin Griffith

TEXT: Proverbs 4:23 *“Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.”*

Working as a Staff Chaplain in the 2nd busiest trauma center in the nation has its unique challenges, but I love my job. Each night I pass through the halls of the Elvis Presley Memorial Trauma Center connecting with families, patients and staff. Boring nights are few and far between, and welcomed by me and the staff. Each time I pass through the Trauma ICU I am reminded just how precious and how fragile life is – and how suddenly it can all change.

Working here has made me appreciate the simple things in life and it has made me realize just how blessed I am. However, working here does have its price as well. Like any other job it can become just another hum drum day at the office. Because death is a constant companion (I’ve stood at the bedside of almost 700 deaths in the past six plus years) I can become easily desensitized or even jaded. Although I may not be personally involved, I have to constantly guard my heart and not allow myself to forget I am dealing with family members who have just lost a loved one. I must strive to be an emotional support and a spiritual ambassador – sometimes the only representative of God in the room. I must guard my heart.

The same can be said of a patient that is, in my estimation, in fairly good shape considering some of the more serious cases I have dealt with in the past. It’s easy for me to forget that those that are not as seriously ill as others are also human beings in need of a consoling touch, a listening ear and a sympathetic heart. In chaplain circles we call it being “fully present.” Being “fully present”, in my estimation, is exactly what we find Jesus doing in the Scriptures as he interacts with all those who come into his realm of influence. He not only listens to them with his ears, he listens to them with his eyes and his heart as well. And yet he chastises the smug, the arrogant and the self-righteous that come within earshot. I must guard my heart.

Not only can the job become hum drum and death all-too-familiar, but also the anxiety of others can take its toll on my attitude. Working in a trauma center will test you, sometimes more than wanted. Scripture tells us: “An anxious heart weighs a man down.” (Proverbs 12:25) Those that administer care to the seriously ill sometimes suffer from a condition known as “Compassion Fatigue.” So, I must constantly be on guard and remind myself that I choose how I react to the stress and anxiety of others. I can choose to be caught up in all the craziness that surrounds me, or I can choose to be a calming presence. I can choose to take things that are said in the “heat of the moment” as personal attacks, or I can choose to understand that people and staff members in “crisis” often say and do things without thinking. If I am not careful I will find myself responding in kind to these perceived attacks and undermine all that I am attempting to accomplish as God’s representative. I must guard my heart.

All too often I am more like the proverbial “frog in the kettle” --- as the temperature rises and I happily sit and boil, smug in my own self-confidence that all is okay and I am in control. And this brings me to another point --- the deceitfulness of the heart. We find in Jeremiah 17:9 a very interesting verse which

makes this point --- *“The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?”* Indeed, who can understand their own heart, then alone the hearts (i.e., motives) of others?

So just how do I guard my heart against this?

First, Luke tells us that the good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart that out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks. So what is it that you put into your heart? If I am to guard my heart I believe I must take specific steps to fill it with good rather than evil. The beginning place for me is in the Scriptures. The Bible is my source of all things good and I endeavor to spend time in it daily. Will this make me perfect? By no means! But I believe it will get me closer to the goal of having a pure heart – a heart that endeavors to please God with my words and actions. I choose to treasure God’s Word – for in doing so I find my heart there.

Second, I believe it important for me to live a prayerful life. By “prayerful” I do not necessarily mean sitting down and spending an hour or two on my knees – I wish I had the time and the discipline to make that happen. However, what I do mean is to be in conversation with God every minute I am possibly able. As I walk through the Trauma Intensive Care Unit, I see many of my patients who are unconscious, on ventilators or even in a coma. I do not make a spectacle of myself, but I do pray for them, even if it is just a short breath prayer of healing and peace. I believe prayer changes things – if nothing else, it guards and changes my heart, and draws me ever closer to God.

Third, I must remember that out of the abundance of my heart my mouth speaks. That is to say the words I speak, and the thoughts I choose to share, are brought forth from the well-spring of my heart. If I am having difficulty with saying inappropriate things or even if I am the saying the right thing in the wrong way, then I know I need to stop and examine just exactly what I have been putting into my heart.

Bio: Kevin Griffith is a Staff Chaplain at the Regional Medical Center in Memphis, TN. He obtained his BA in Bible from Lubbock Christian College (now University) and served churches of Christ for almost 15 years in Texas and California in the capacity of Youth and Family Minister. In 2001 Kevin moved his family to Memphis so he could complete his Masters of Divinity degree. Having completed this degree in 2005, Kevin enrolled in Clinical Pastoral Education for a year in order to train for a career in Chaplaincy. In September 2007 he began working at the Elvis Presley Memorial Trauma Center, a part of the Regional Medical Center, and serves there to this day. He has been married to Michele Roder Griffith, for 22 plus years. They have four children: Shelby (18) Peyton (14); Abby (11); and Levi (9). Kevin and his wife home school their children.

Easter's Promise

by K. Rex Butts

I've been asked to write on the question of whether or not God can heal the heart. That's a great question and especially a great question to ask around Easter Sunday. Easter among Christians means hearing a lot of talk about the death and resurrection of Jesus. It's the story of Jesus dying on the cross on that Good Friday and then rising from the empty tomb on that Resurrection Sunday.

I love the story and as one who believes in Jesus Christ and follows him, I want this story to shape my life...and your's too. But sometimes that's hard. Sometimes, very hard!

This summer will mark eleven years since my wife and I buried our oldest child, Kenneth James Butts. His death was crushing! All of the prayers for a healthy child... Every hope and dream we had for our son growing up to serve God...

The most difficult thing about such suffering is the way it paralyzes life. Time stops in a way. While the rest of the world continues on, oblivious to horror, the pause button on life has not only been pushed but seems stuck. As a believer, the question is whether or not God can heal the broken heart, restore hope, and give a reason for continuing on in faith.

Struggling With Faith

Catastrophic suffering, which comes in many forms, may be something that a person never "gets over" so to speak. I don't think I have overcome the death of my son but I have learned how to live with it. That's what I tell others too. The question is *how?*

I want to suggest that it's a choice of learning to have faith in God again. However, I don't mean a faith that suppresses all questions in exchange for absolute certainty. How could such certainty ever exist again when suffering has opened the door to so many unanswered questions. What I mean by faith is the choice to trust in God and the promise he makes in the crucified and resurrected Jesus Christ (even when many unanswered questions that remain).

In Romans 8, the Apostle Paul writes, "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose" (v. 28, NRSV).¹ I don't believe that this verse is meant to eliminate all faith questions. Rather, given the context in which Paul describes the Christian life as having "present sufferings" (v. 18) and "groaning" while in wait for the "redemption of our bodies" (vv. 22-23), Paul was offering a word of hope. This word of hope is grounded in the history of what God has done in Christ, namely through the death and resurrection, and what that means for the future.

There is still so much about God and life that remains mystery. We'll likely never know or understand fully why we suffer. What Paul says reminds us that God is at work for our good, which is our

¹ Unfortunately, this passage has often been used as a prooftext offered in response to suffering. Whether offered as a pastoral response to the pain experienced by those who suffer or as a polemical response to the doubts experienced by the suffering, using this verse as a proof text often comes across as dismissive of the problem. In other words, it is like trying to put a bandaid on a gaping wound and acting as though that it helpful when in fact it is not. There isn't any prooftext which can heal the wounds of suffering. Only God can do that. This passage is merely a window to see that redemptive work of God and that is how I use this passage here.

redemption in Christ, and God will get that done. That's why Paul goes on to say "in all things we are more than conquerors" in Christ Jesus (v. 37). Can we trust God with that?

Choosing Faith

Trusting God again or for the first time isn't easy. It takes time, a lot of time too. Forget any programatic "how to" process. It doesn't exist or at least I haven't discovered one yet. But we can choose to believe in the promise that God is still redemptively at work for our good and that in the end all things will somehow work together for this good.

Before my son died, I had a faith of absolute certainty. When it came to the way God and life worked, I was sure. With absolute certainty, I was sure. My son's death shattered that certainty. But for nearly two years, I kept trying to gain back that certainty. I nearly lost all faith in God doing so. The problem was that the faith I had — absolute certainty — was gone for good. I couldn't go back living as though what had happened didn't happen, so there wasn't any possible way to get the certainty I longed for again. But I did and still do believe that God is redemptively at work in Jesus Christ and so I chose to trust God again and trust what he is doing in Christ.

That choice didn't eliminate my questions but it freed me from needing the answers... and the need for absolute certainty, which really isn't faith. In place of that old faith, I gained a new faith that was assurance. It was assurance that God is still at work even though I don't always understand. This new faith was healing, a healing deep within my heart in the sense that I had hope again. I was able to go on living again. God undid the pause button on my life and pushed the play button again.

If you are reading this and you have endured some form of suffering, I hope my own story might help you towards healing in your heart. I write this with the hope that it gives you the courage to choose faith. I share this story in hope that you can lean into the Easter story, the story of the crucified and resurrected Jesus Christ, trusting God to heal.

May God bless us all, even in the midst of uncertainties, to trust him and his Easter's promise!

K. Rex Butts serves as the preacher and minister with the Columbia Church of Christ in Columbia, Maryland. He holds a Master of Divinity degree from Harding School of Theology in Memphis, Tennessee, and has written numerous articles for Christian publications. Rex posts regular blogs and other materials at www.kingdomseeking.com. He has been married to Laura for fourteen years and together they are raising two children.

When the Heart Hurts

by Tim Gunnells

The late Dallas Willard was a professor of Philosophy at the University of Southern California, and devout disciple of Jesus Christ. Willard challenged people without being difficult. He wished for everyone to pursue their own spirituality, but he came at it from a Christian worldview. Though he wrote several books related to spiritual formation, two were most influential on me, *Renovation of the Heart and Revolution of Character*.

In *Renovation of the Heart*, Willard suggests that there are six basic aspects of every person's life.¹ The six aspects are 1) thought, 2) feeling, 3) choice, 4) body, 5) social context, and 6) soul. True spiritual formation, he says (and I agree), takes place when these six essential parts of the human self are effectively organized around God.² In *Revolution of Character*, Willard exchanges "thought and feeling" for "heart".

The ideal of the spiritual life occurs when all six essential parts of the human self are effectively attuned to God as they are restored and sustained by him. Spiritual formation in Christ is the process leading toward that ideal end—the self fully integrated and attuned to God. To mature in spiritual formation means to love God with all of the heart, soul, mind, and strength and to love one's neighbor as oneself.³

Here is the bottom line. All the parts of our life are interrelated. Our thoughts and feelings influence our choices. Our body is the part of us involved in the physical world around us, and it does the things that we choose based on our thoughts and feelings. Our social context is our interpersonal relationships with others, and certainly we cannot separate our thoughts, feelings, choices, or body from those relationships. The soul is the part that integrates the other five into one unit.

In the remainder of this post, I want to elaborate a little more on the role of thoughts and feelings (the "heart") on our well-being, generally, and our spiritual maturity, specifically. So, for our purposes, I will refer to them collectively as "the heart".

I have suffered through two major depressions in my adult life. The first was brought on by unresolved grief and newfound loneliness shortly after I graduated from college. I had lost a dear friend to death, and I had not dealt with it appropriately. I also had moved to a small town where there was no one my age and little to occupy me. In the second instance, I became emotionally, physically, and spiritually exhausted while trying to mediate a terrible situation between three families. I gave everything I had and it was more than I could bear. I entered into the darkness a second time, but with several things in my corner: a wonderful wife, a dear friend who was a nurse, and a great church support system. Plus, I had been through this before, and I knew better how to work through it.

The reason I am sharing this is because it is directly related to "the heart". Again, "the heart" combines thoughts and feelings. Both times that I was depressed, my heart became heavy and overwhelmed with stress and grief. My thoughts turned inward and self-centered. I was filled with dread. I began to feel sorry for myself and could no longer see anyone else's needs. My thoughts focused solely on me and my

¹ Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), 30-31.

² Ibid, 31.

³ Don Simpson and Dallas Willard, *Revolution of Character: Discovering Christ's Pattern for Spiritual Transformation* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2005), 23-37.

own miseries. My feelings were raw. Everything agitated me. Everything pushed me over the edge emotionally. My “heart” was not functioning properly. It was not organized around God; it was organized around Tim.

My Dad (a minister and counselor) had given me a book around 1990 that I had in my library but had never read. During my first depression back in 1992, I saw it on my bookshelf. It was “Telling Yourself the Truth” by William Backus and Marie Chapien. The concepts were simple and Biblical. When we turn inward and focus on the negative in our lives, we become anxious and depressed. However, when we begin to think about our blessings and turn “the heart” outward toward others and toward things that are excellent and praiseworthy, we begin to become healthy again.

One of the suggestions in the book is to take out a piece of paper and write out all the things that are good in your life. Write out all the blessings, all the positives, all the things that are going well and then think about these things every day. Invariably, those who are depressed believe that the whole world has turned on them and that nothing is okay anymore. The truth is that that is a lie. We must tell ourselves the real truth. The truth is that we have a lot of things going well for us, even when a lot of things are bad. When we recognize the good, the bad begins to diminish. We need to turn our thoughts more toward God and hand our feelings (emotions) over to Him. When we do these things then our life choices will impact how we treat our body, how we interact with other people, and thus lead to a healthier soul.

I am not saying that this is the cure for everyone’s depression. In fact, if you are feeling hopeless, helpless, and overwhelmed by anxiety, then you should seek professional help right away (that is what I did). By all means, go see your family doctor, talk with a friend, or make an appointment with a counselor or minister. Whatever you do, don’t believe the lie that life can never be better again.

When we get caught up in the idea that life is all about us, then we are headed down a dangerous road. Instead, we should focus on our blessings, turn our anxieties over to God, and start telling ourselves the truth. The truth is threefold: I need a relationship with the One who made me and knows me best; I need to recognize that there are other people in my world who need me and need to be served; I need to turn to God in prayer and my thinking to things that are pure, lovely, and admirable. Then, the peace of God will guard my heart.

“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.” (Philippians 4:6-8)

Tim Gunnells has been in full-time ministry for over 20 years, serving churches in Arizona, Alabama, Mississippi, and Tennessee. He is currently the senior minister for the Canyon Church of Christ in Phoenix, Arizona and was recently named the Director of University Relations for Amridge University (www.amridgeuniversity.edu) in Montgomery, Alabama. Tim blogs about Christian Spirituality at www.desertspiritual.com and he is writing a book about spiritual transformation. Tim holds a Doctor of Ministry degree from Harding School of Theology.

Healthy Hearts Recognize Disease

by Dr Gailyn Van Rheenan

The church is not equated with the kingdom since God's rule is from eternity to eternity and is exercised even over those who do not consciously submit to his reign. The church, however, must obey Jesus' teaching concerning the kingdom of God and manifest its presence in the world today. Robert Webber says, "The church's mission is to *show the world what it looks like when a community of people lives under the reign of God*" (2002, 133). Because the kingdom of God runs counter to the cultures of the kingdoms of this world, the church that is faithful to Christ will always be distinct from the dominant surrounding culture.

The church is God's people called out from the world to be his witness in the world. As an institution, it appears fallible and weak, but paradoxically it has outlasted states, nations, and empires (Newbigin 1989, 221). The church reflects the eternal nature of the kingdom that cannot be destroyed (Dan. 2:44; 7:13–14). Its survival is rooted in being God's people under his eternal sovereignty.

Often Christians fail to recognize the difference between the values and ethics of God's kingdom and those of the world. The world so permeates the church that Christians no longer recognize biblical allusions to its separateness. How are disciples of Christ *in* the world but not *of* the world (John 17:14–16)? How can people of God live in the heavenlies while dwelling in the "earthlies" (Eph. 1:3; 2:6; 3:10–12)? What does Paul mean when he says that the believer's "citizenship is in heaven" (Phil. 3:20)? Why do two Christian scholars define the church as "a colony, an island of one culture in the middle of another"? "In baptism," they say, "our citizenship is transferred from one dominion to another" (Hauerwas and Willimon 1989, 12).

Israel illustrates a nation's struggle to be God's distinctive people. God's covenant with Israel set them aside as "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" within God's world (Ex. 19:5–6). Their designated purpose was to become God's light to the nations (Isa. 42:6; 49:6) and God's priests mediating his purposes. Unfortunately, Israel forgot that they were "chosen" and imitated the nations around them by going after their gods (Deut. 32:15–18). As a result, God sent them into captivity (2 Kings 17:7–23). The church, like Israel, is called to be a distinct, separate people, personally relating to the God who chose them.

Peter defines the church's separateness from the world in words that call to mind God's election of Israel. The church, God's new Israel, was to be "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession..." (1 Peter 2:9). Such separation from the world led Peter to describe Christians as "aliens and strangers in the world" (v. 11; cf. 1:1, 17). They have entered into Christ through a fundamental change of life, called a *new birth*, which gives them an eternal inheritance with God (1:3, 23). As strangers in a world not their own, they must be holy because their God is holy (v. 15), and they must not imitate the vain ways of their forefathers (vv. 13–19). Because they are God's distinct people, they are able to suffer as Christians without shame, knowing that they are participating in the sufferings of Christ (4:12–16).

Unfortunately, the church often loses its identity as God's distinct people. Vicedom has written that the greatest problem with Christians is that "they do not know that they are Christians" (1965, 80). The church, however, rather than permeating the world with the eternal message, is being permeated by the

world. Philip Kenneson believes that the church in the United States, although numerically strong, is seriously ill. He says,

It is quite possible for the church to be both growing and yet not bearing the fruit of the Spirit. What is happening in many cases is that the church is simply cultivating at the center of its life the seeds that the dominant culture has sown in its midst. . . . Stated another way, the church that is being cultivated in the United States looks suspiciously like the dominant culture rather than being an alternative to it. (1999, 11, 12)

In light of Kenneson's statements, Christians must discern whether the church reflects the purposes and mind of God.

Peter describes the church as "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that [we] may declare the praises of him who called [us] out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Peter 2:9). The last part of this verse is contingent on the first part. The church as "God's chosen possession," calls sinners to holiness in God. However, a church without a distinctive nature, partaking of the world, calls people into a fraternity with Christian trappings. This group, because it is not sufficiently connected to the vine, is unable to bear the fruit of God's Spirit.

How do Christians testify to those in the world while not being of the world? The Quaker missionary Thomas Kelly wrote,

He plucks the world out of our hearts, loosening the chains of attachment. And He hurls the world into our hearts, where we and He together carry it in infinitely tender love. (1996, 20)

Dr. Gailyn Van Rheenen served with his family and co-workers as a church-planting missionary to East Africa for 14 years, 13 years among the Kipsigis people of Kenya. He later taught missions and evangelism at Abilene Christian University for over 17 years.

In 2004 Gailyn formed **Mission Alive**, a ministry that partners with churches to plant churches throughout North America. During the last four years Mission Alive has worked with church planters and their teams to plant fifteen churches and currently have seven other church plantings in process. In this role he serves as the chairman of the board of Mission Alive and as its executive director.

Dr. Van Rheenen has graciously shared an excerpt from his popular missions textbook, *Missions: Biblical Foundation and Contemporary Strategies*, that he's recently revised.

How to Avoid Spiritual Obesity

by Preston Cottrell

I met Preston through a mutual friend a couple of years ago. I really appreciate the perspective Preston brings to Scripture as he merges his talents and interests in art and theology. Too often our expression of faith and worship takes a logical, rational form that marginalises our emotional and imaginative characteristics. This article isn't about art, but it does provide an excellent challenge for us to keep our hearts healthy. ~ Peter

TEXT: Matthew 7:24 ***“Anyone who hears and obeys these teachings of mine is like a wise person who built a house on solid rock.”***

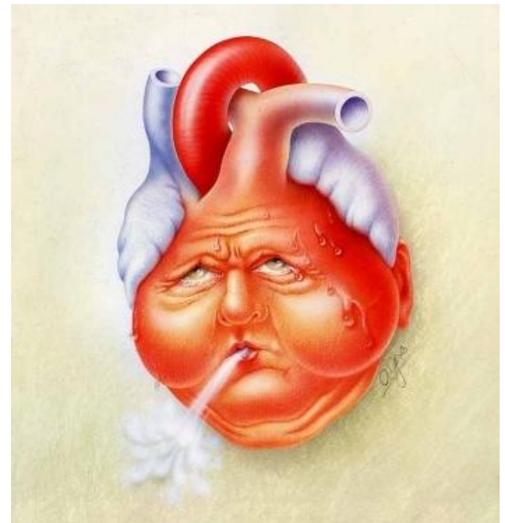
At the end of what we refer to as “The Sermon on the Mount,” Jesus instructs people to hear his words and put them into practice just as a wise person will build a house on a solid foundation (**Matthew 7:24ff**). He could have ended his talk many different ways, but I think Jesus was fully aware that one human tendency is to not practice the things we hear despite a compelling message. Probably many people still went away from his challenges amazed at his teaching, but also content to live a blah life. I know the same condition exists in pockets of our own churches and in my own life. It is an issue of the heart.

Physical & Spiritual Obesity

I started to realize this temptation of lethargic spirituality in an unlikely way. A few months ago I started doing the things that I know I should have been doing all my life: maintaining a properly portioned diet and an adequate exercise program. But because I know myself too well, I came to the realization that I could not simply stumble into a healthy lifestyle. There was no way I could resist a slice of chocolate cake, glorious mounds of pasta, or just one more cookie. There was no way I could go everyday exercising with no excuse (and there are many). Now don't get me wrong, I was in pretty good shape; however, I knew if I wanted to get into great shape, I needed some structure, consistency, and passion in what I was doing.

So I began a process to increase my physical health and better my daily stamina. I was not interested in gimmicks or enticements; I was ready for a life change. It promised to be a major sacrifice of time, convenience, pain, and money. Simply put, it was filled with two four-letter words, “diet” and “work” (aka “exercise”). This plan was straightforward, but effective. As a result, my new lifestyle affected every aspect of my health.

My physical transformation naturally allowed me to think about spiritual transformation. Even Paul used training and athletic metaphors to illustrate the physical/spiritual connection (e.g. Phil. 2:16; Gal. 2:2, 5:7; 2 Tim. 4:7). He recognized that like having a healthy physical heart, having a healthy spiritual heart is about true devotion. He was not referring to devotion that is cheap, sentimental, or blind. He spoke of



devotion that means sacrifice. Devotion is not about attendance, self-inflation, or gratification; it is conscious effort to glorify God through serving, lifting others above myself, and asking others to check the progress. Just like an athlete never really ends training, so too a Christian must continue growing, learning, and changing.

When I look over my spiritual life, I also realized that growth in Christ involves much of the same discipline. I represent one sliver of a generation that yearns for every aspect of life sacrificed to God. Give me a life that says my hours each day will be for the betterment of our human community. Let me pursue conversion rather than convenience; Let me learn how to embrace spiritual yearning, struggling, and pain as the martyrs of the first few centuries of Christianity boldly assumed their place among the heavenly angels. The plan is simple, but few Christians really, truly, and completely follow it — all too often, including myself. At times I am amazed at the teaching of Jesus, but when it comes to really practicing faith, I relate to the sandy foundation of the crowds on the mountainside. Some Christians give money in such a way to have a “safety net” instead of relying upon God to walk each and every day with a renewed sense of dependency. Some rationalize time, energy, and focus just hoping that at the end of the day, the good deeds outweigh the bad. Some place family time over personal growth instead of leading the family to truly know God and live as his wonderful disciples. Despite the desire to truly follow God, it is so easy to slip into spiritual obesity.

Having a healthy spiritual heart is not just about ridding our lives of sin. While sin-ridding comes with it, healthy living involves experiencing an “inexpressible and glorious joy” (1 Peter 1:8). For Jesus, faith was conceptually pretty easy: ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’ and ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’ (Luke 10:27). It is so tempting to respond like the expert in the Law and try to clarify some points to justify myself; in a similar way I struggled to change my physical lifestyle to get in better shape. This is practically a tough road. The tough part about Jesus’ command is not the concept, but the practice, the devotion. I speak for a lot of young Christians who are ready to work. We are beyond the stages of feeling guilty to come to worship a few set times during the week. We don’t want the hooks and gimmicks; We don’t want ease; We don’t want just to be nice people so that we can get a mansion in heaven. Sometimes we will fail . . . but that is life. We are all called to make a difference in the world, to allow Christ to shine in every dimension of our being. In other words, we are ready for the rigorous diet and exercise of our faith. There is tremendous fulfillment as we discover what it means to live as new creations. So are you ready for that journey?

5 Beginning Practical Steps Forward (For Physical and Spiritual Renewal)

1) **Surround yourself with supporters:** You know the naysayers, critics, and negative people. Their attitudes are toxic. Criticism and conflict can keep you on track, but make sure you discern the difference between constructive and obstructive criticism.

2) **As growth occurs, the lifestyle is easier:** Progress may be slow, but slow triumphs feel great and challenge new areas of focus. Don’t get so bogged down in the complex practicality that you miss the ease of the concept.

3) **Keep records:** Knowing where you came from provides motivation for future endeavors.



4) **Rid yourself of fear and guilt:** Somewhere along the way, the short-term gains of these two words twisted the methodology of church evangelism. This works about as well as doctors telling people to diet and exercise in a world of cheeseburgers, fries, and busy schedules. It is easy to lose traction with each failed attempt, but the worst outcome is to give up on the pursuit.

5) **Don't hyperextend the connection:** Since the late nineteenth century, proponents of muscular Christianity have perhaps placed too rigorous emphasis on the connection between physical stamina and spiritual well-being. While I believe in some connection, spiritual and physical health are complicated to fully understand; Excellence in one area is not necessarily a measure of competency in the other.

Preston graduated from the Harding School of Theology (Memphis, TN) with a M.A. in Historical Theology. Currently, he is the Youth Minister at the Manchester Church of Christ in New Hampshire helping teens and adults to grow each day closer to God. He also serves carrots to the teens during hangout times (and they look forward to them!) On the side, he has a great interest in the integration of art and faith, which is the focus of his blog entitled, "Faithful Aesthetics" (www.prestoncottrell.wordpress.com).

Healthy Homes: Spiritual Conversations (part 1)

by Peter Horne

Healthy Homes play a vital role in producing spiritually healthy hearts. We could define Healthy Homes in many different ways. In my Mothers Day sermon this year I chose to encourage spiritual conversation within the home. Do your conversations bring God's presence into the consciousness of others?

- Read **Proverbs 30:24-33**.

I'm going to break this week's discussion into two posts. Today I'll talk about unstructured conversations, and tomorrow I'll delve into formal Biblical instruction in the home.

I am a big proponent of "spiritual conversations". My church upbringing occurred in a very logical environment. Emotions and feelings were typically criticised as "pentecostal" and had little/no place in discussion of Scripture. I never heard questions like, "How is your relationship with God?" or statements like "This morning's worship service was inspirational." Too much risk that one might be crossing over to the dark [hand-raising] side.

Then one day my world was turned upside down by a simple question. I was probably about 13 and on a family holiday to visit my parent's old friends. Mr Hogden was an unusual bloke. He ran his own sawmill for years until the suburbs surrounded it and then he retired. He'd not seen me since I was a toddler. That lack of familiarity didn't prevent him catching me alone at one point in our visit and asking, "Are you a Christian?" Of course, I gave him the textbook answer, "Yes, I was baptised a couple of years ago." To which he responded with the question,

"Great, but are you a Christian?"

WOW!! My mind was blown.

Mr Hogden could have warmed up to this 13 year old by asking about my favorite subject at school. He could have tried to find common ground by discussing sports. He could have shown interest in me as a person by asking about my home town and personal interests. Instead, he challenged the commitment I'd made to follow Jesus. My head exploded. I've never been able to get that question out of my head.

I wonder how many opportunities I've missed since then to bring God's presence into people's lives because I choose to talk about the weather, sports or even church life.

In a passage of the Hebrew Scriptures known to the Jews as the *Shema* (Hebrew for "hear") God has just gone through the formal process of giving the Israelite nation his laws: The Ten Commandments, and [what Jesus called] The Greatest Command. He next instructs the Israelites how to make this covenant part of their DNA.

These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Deuteronomy 6:6-7

How can we pass on our faith to our children? Talk about it. Talk about what God means to you. Talk about what God wants for them. Discuss God's presence in the world. Describe God's likes and dislikes. Inspire them to make representing God one of their life priorities. Talk about Jesus when you sit at home. Talk about the Holy Spirit as you walk along the road. Talk about God at bedtime and over breakfast. Make God a natural part of their world.

The book of Proverbs provides a great demonstration of spiritual conversation. Sure, it contains sections of formal instruction, but Proverbs also refers frequently to natural phenomena to reinforce godly wisdom. In chapter 30 a guy named Agur points to small animals that demonstrate wisdom (v24-28). He makes the point not to let size, or strength or the perceptions of others limit your accomplishments. He's able to teach as he walks along the road because he observes his environment and seeks lessons that will benefit others.



A wind-blown "leaning tree" in Geraldton, Western Australia

I'll close with a simple example of my own. I love the wind. I grew up on the coast and there's always a breeze. I almost went crazy when I first moved from Australia to Memphis waiting for the wind to blow. So many days it's just completely still.

Interestingly, in both the Greek and Hebrew languages the word for **wind** is the same as that for **breath** which is the same as that for **spirit** and **Spirit**. Often as I feel the wind blowing I like to think of the Spirit of God surrounding me, rustling my hair, pulling at my clothes. I breathe that Spirit into me and so God's presence surrounds me and indwells me. I know tornadoes and hurricanes take the fuzzy edge off this imagery, but really they just open up another conversation: A *spiritual* conversation.

Healthy Homes: Spiritual Conversations (part 2)

by Peter Horne

Some lessons require us to sit down in order to listen, focus, concentrate, write, or remember. At other times, thoughtful people can do a lot of teaching on the run. Jesus' parables provide a great example of using everyday events and situations to teach profound points.

After I wrote the last post I also came across this observation in a commentary. In John 7:37-38 Jesus says "*Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.*" That's a remarkable statement, but the context is also important. The opening of v37 sets the time as the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles.

On the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles the priests conducted an elaborate ceremony that involved the pouring of water and wine as a sacrifice to God. The feast acknowledged God's provision of water when the Israelites wandered in the wilderness. According to D.A. Carson (PNTC, 322) this ceremony also anticipated "the Lord's pouring out of the Spirit in the last days." Jesus used the events going on around him as an opportunity to proclaim a truth about himself and the kingdom of God.

But how do we learn about the Feast of Tabernacles? We learn by sitting down and reading a book or a blog. Perhaps we learn about the feast in a Bible Class. It's extremely unlikely we will learn the details of the Feast of Tabernacles in a casual conversation traveling from one place to another.

I suspect that when we think of formal spiritual education most of us think first of our church's Bible classes. That's not a bad thing. Churches should have the goal of providing top notch Bible education, both accumulating knowledge and putting it into practice. When Christians fail to take advantage of the educational opportunities churches provide they seldom substitute those opportunities with something more spiritually beneficial. (I also accept that not all church offerings reflect the same quality.)

However, first and foremost families/parents bear the responsibility for the spiritual education in the home. In Ephesians 6:4 fathers are given the specific responsibility to "*bring [your children] up in the training and instruction of the Lord.*" It doesn't say "Fathers drive your children to church" it tells fathers to train and teach their children. And just because the passage doesn't specifically mention mothers doesn't mean that they have zero responsibility in this area.

So how do you study and teach the Bible within your home? Throughout my childhood Dad would make sure we sat down to read a few Bible verses and pray together most mornings before we ran out the door to catch the school bus. With our 3 year old daughter we now make sure her children's Bibles are part of the books read at bedtime. We also deliberately make sure that most of the songs we sing with her are Christian songs.

Maybe in your family it's a time of prayer after a meal together or a discussion of the sermon over Sunday lunch. Whatever works best for you, I encourage you to take seriously the task of having formal spiritual instruction as part of your family's routine.

I'm not saying that parents have a responsibility to take 50 weeks holding long boring discussions of the book of Jeremiah while memorizing 26 separate passages per year. I like this suggestion from Mark Driscoll,

To be a good teacher, dad should use his imagination, particularly when his children are small. A wise dad makes up fun Bible questions for kids to answer and buys props and secondhand clothes so that his children can dress up in costumes and act out the Bible stories with full drama while he serves as the narrator.

A wise dad may realize that a personal quiet time for himself is unwise; rather than hiding away in a quiet place to read the Bible, it is often best to do so in the noisy living room where the kids can see and climb on their dad while he reads his Bible. (Pastor Dad, 27-28)



Driscoll may put a little too much pressure on all parents to teach super-creatively, but he provides a great goal. It's well worth looking around for resources to help guide family discussions. Christian bookstores have all sorts of devotionals for couples, for teens, and for younger children that may help guide these times of family spiritual sit downs. Here's a list of some websites you might also find helpful:

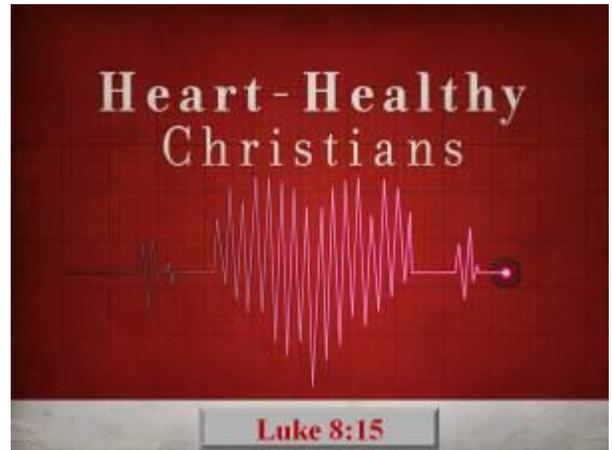
- Crosswalk.com has a page for parents with articles that might prompt conversation.
- FocusOnTheFamily.com has some resources for what they call "Mealtime Devotionals".
- Here's a longer list at ThrivingFamily.com.
- FamilyDevotions.org has a new post every day. They don't seem very creative, but may provide a starting point for you to mold for your family's needs.

A Dirty Story: Luke 8

by Peter Horne

In the parable of the soils (Luke 8:4-15) the good soil represents the kingdom of God. In this post I'm not interested in the other soils. I just want to identify the characteristics of God's kingdom, and the people within it.

We find Part A of the answer to this question in verse 8. "**Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.**" Elsewhere I've discussed how this phrase essentially means "**Listen and learn**". I expect many people in the crowd that day heard Jesus' story of dirt and seeds and either thought he was discussing agriculture or thought he was a little bit nuts. Particularly when Jesus didn't offer a more detailed explanation to them.



But the disciples closest to Jesus made the effort to ask that Jesus explain the meaning of his story. They wanted to learn, were willing to listen, and adopted an attitude of humility. Rather than dismiss Jesus' story as irrelevant because the meaning wasn't immediately clear, they conceded that the problem might be with their understanding, not his teaching. People in the kingdom of God humbly listen and learn from God. I believe this is the first concrete step in the journey from unbeliever to disciple.

Listening and learning from God is a prerequisite of being good soil. By learning I mean – hearing and applying Jesus' teaching to my life. Jesus wasn't just telling the crowd to stay there and listen to him. He was telling them to learn from him and return to their villages and live transformed lives. Similarly, he's not telling us to attend every Bible class we can and do lots of listening, he's telling us to apply God's will in our lives.

We find Part B of the answer in v 15. "**But the seed in the good ground—these are the ones who, having heard the word with an honest and good heart, hold on to it and by enduring, bear fruit.**" (HCSB)

People followed Jesus for many reasons:

- the food;
- the entertainment,
- curiosity, or
- rivals trying to trip him up.

When Jesus speaks of the good dirt [the kingdom of God] receiving his teaching with an honest and good heart, he reiterates v8. He's looking for genuine, humble, and open hearts: people willing to learn and apply. Some translations make it sound as though God's seed only falls on people who are already "good and honest". For instance, the NIV reads, "*the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart...*". Perhaps I'm just reading it from a strange perspective, but that seems counter to the message of the word.

The whole point of the Gospel is that “all have sinned” and that no one is good or noble without God. I’ve seen many people fall into the trap of thinking they have to make themselves noble and good before they can receive the Gospel into their lives. Perhaps this makes me over-sensitive to the wording. For this reason I believe the best translations connect the state of the heart with the manner of hearing. If we won’t allow God’s word to penetrate our hearts, then we more closely resemble one of the other soils.

People in God’s kingdom hang on to God’s word with a death grip.

Next, people in God’s kingdom hang on to God’s word with a death grip. This doesn’t just mean memorize it, although that can be beneficial. Jesus expects citizens of God’s kingdom to embed his teaching into our lives. If we want to limit his teaching to an intellectual exercise and not retain it in our lives, in our behavior, in our values and in our relationships, then we’re misunderstanding the claim He’s making on our lives.

Lastly, the good soil is persistent and patient. I like the NRSV translation that uses the term “*patient enduring*”. Good soil knows that a good crop takes time to grow. Jesus didn’t offer a new life by Friday. It takes time for new habits to form, for behaviours to change and for values to realign. It takes patient enduring. Remember Psalm 1 that says the righteous person/life will “*yield its fruit in season*”.

Sometimes the Holy Spirit brings rapid transformation in our lives, but those changes still need to last a lifetime. Being good dirt is all about living lives of patient endurance that God promises will bear fruit.