

Matters of the Heart

What the Biblical Word “Heart” Means

In our Scripture we hear a great deal about the heart and secondarily the mind. The concept of heart and mind are so different for us than it was for the writers of Scripture that I thought it might be fun to explore this a little bit, plus, it is of vital importance in understanding particularly what Jesus is saying to us on a regular basis.

In both the Hebrew Scriptures (old Testament) and the New Testament the word “heart” is used to refer to the whole of the innermost part of the human, NOT merely the emotions.

However, in the twenty-first century English the word “heart” is used to express the emotions as an individual compartment of the inner part of the human.

It is common for Americans to divide humans into the physical and the spiritual and psychological. While this is a widespread insight, the way most Americans compartmentalize the internal, spiritual aspect of humans is diverse from many other cultures.

We Americans tend to see people as having two separate parts, wherein one part is the emotions, which we refer to as the heart, then a brain, which houses the mind.

The Bible does not divide humans so easily – it focuses on all three making up the whole of a being – this is Biblically called the “*heart*.” So, when both the Hebrew Scriptures and New Testament speak about the *heart*, it never means merely human feelings (emotions). The Biblical word “*heart*,” is the inner aspect of humans, made of three parts all together: Mental Process, which is the major part (where action & reaction take place), which is to lead a person in their life.

Emotions (which we only process as reaction), as icing to enrich our lives.

Will, the seat of the will (discretionary, volitional, decision-making) where decisions are made between the rational and the emotive.

Paul taught that the purpose of God’s command is love that comes from a “*pure heart*” (1 Tim. 1:5).

The heart is spoken of in Scripture as the center of the moral and spiritual life. The conscience, for instance, is associated with the heart. In fact, the Hebrew language had no word for conscience, so the word heart was often used to express this concept such as in Job 27, “*my heart shall not reproach me so long as I live.*” And in the New Testament the heart is spoken of also as that which condemns us as in a “*guilty conscience.*” (1 John 3:19-21).

On the negative side, depravity is said to issue from the heart. In Matthew Jesus said that out of the heart comes evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. In other words, defilement comes from within rather than from without. For Jesus, out heart, mind and critical thinking all participated.

The heart is the place where God works in the individual. For instance, the work of the law is “*written in their hearts,*” and in Romans Paul says our conscience is the proof of this. The heart is the field where seed (the Word of God) is sown. In addition to being the place where the natural laws of God are written, the heart is the place of renewal.

Before Saul became king, God gave him a new heart. God promised Israel that God would give them a new spirit within, take away their “*stony heart*” and give them a “*heart of flesh.*”

When the Bible refers to the *heart* it is not referring to the emotions solely. This is the place of the seat of the will, but always according to the intellect in response to what God has said to us. So why does any of this matter? On a practical level it helps with translation, but more importantly, it goes right to the “heart” of what it means to be *holy*. To be holy is to be a whole person. Jesus teaches us constantly to give up our multiple ideas of separateness and division. We constantly try to separate our lives by “good and bad,” “spiritual and non-spiritual,” “for us or against us.”

Jesus is constantly calling us to give up such ideas and embrace the world, our God and ourselves as a unified breathing, living, unified whole. When we begin by separating our hearts from our minds a whole host of divisiveness follows.

The heart as the seat of the will, the driving force within us that seeks after God’s beauty and transformation and is where we begin to unify around God’s hope for the human family. It is where and how we overcome the artificial fears and divisions that plague us.

Change begins with us; a change of heart about how we live and move in the world begins as an act of the will. What is your heart, your whole self mind, body and spirit, yearning for?

I am delighted to be back with all of you and absolutely *craving* to get back behind that altar on Sunday and break bread with you. I hope to see you there!

Grace and Peace, Stephanie+