

I. Set Up:

A. This week we pivot from The Big Four topics on identity – we are highly valued, deeply fallen, eternity shaped and greatly loved – to a discussion of, “so now what?” This is based on Christ’s comments in Mark 12.

II. Intro

A. In the first four talks of this series, I attempted a radical thing: I tried to change the way you think about yourself. I argued that how we think about ourselves matters, but getting it right is a challenge, especially today.

B. I noted that it’s always been hard, mostly because of our sin (especially our pride). I also noted that our culture has surfaced some new challenges.

C. And then I advocated for what I called the Big Four: we are highly valued, deeply fallen, eternity shaped and greatly loved.

D. Today I want to talk about our heart and then ask you to do a radical thing.

III. In Mark 12, Jesus is asked to prioritize the law.

A. There were over 600 laws in the Old Testament. When you add in those the Pharisees added, there were more. It was all a bit much. So, it’s not that surprising when Jesus meets a guy who asks for the Cliff Notes. I’m reading from Mark 12:28

1. ²⁸ **One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?”**

2. ²⁹ **“The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. (This is the Shema, a declaration about God and the fact that there is only one God, that the Jews would say first thing in the morning and the last thing at night). ³⁰ Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’³¹ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.”**

3. ³² **“Well said, teacher,” the man replied. “You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. ³³ To love him with all your heart (*kardia* in Greek), with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.”**

4. ³⁴ **When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” And from then on no one dared ask him any more questions.**

B. For the record, this is not the only place we read about exchanges like this. Related passages are found in the other synoptic Gospels. We also get discussions about the heart:

1. In Psalm 51, where David prays, **“create in me a clean heart.”**

2. In Proverbs 3, where Solomon tells us to **“trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding;”**

3. In Proverbs 4:23, where we are instructed to **“guard our heart, because everything flows out of it.”**

4. In Colossians 3, where Paul writes, **“since you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.”** (That would be a good verse to memorize).

C. I could keep going. There are about one thousand references to the heart in the Bible, which suggest that it is important – which suggests that if we want to grow; if we want to mature; if we want to become more like Christ; if we want to be renewed, we need to attend to our heart.

D. To come at this from a different direction, let me note what Jesus doesn't say. He does not say. He does not summarize the law by saying:

1. You need to learn these things – if you gain this insight, understand this principle, acquire this knowledge, memorize this code – you will grow.

a) Let me be clear, the Bibles not against learning. Later in this verse we are told to love God with our mind. Education is a good thing.

b) But, despite our Modern – Enlightenment – bias that transformation automatically follows information - that implies salvation by education. Knowledge is not enough.

2. In fact, knowledge about the Bible is not enough.

a) We need to know what is in the book. This is a key way God reveals himself to us. In 2 Timothy 2, we are told to **study to present ourselves as those approved to God, rightly handling the Word of truth.** In Psalm 119 we are told to **hide God's Word in our heart.**

b) We need to learn the Book, but Jesus consistently attacks people who had memorized the Bible. He asks, “have you not heard?” or “Have you not read?” Of course they had. They had memorized the Old Testament. But that was not enough.

c) Filling our minds with the doctrines and truths of God is important and too often ignored, but that is not where Jesus goes first.

3. So, Jesus does not summarize the law by saying, “you need to learn these things.” Additionally, he does not say, try harder or get up earlier. He does not say that the way forward comes through a certain diet or if we do more pushups or wear certain clothes.

E. What does it say? What does it lead with: Jesus summarizes the law by saying, love God with all your heart.

F. So what does that mean? What is our heart?

IV. Well, according to the Bible, our heart is Central Command.

A. In the Bible, the ‘heart’ is not a muscle that pumps blood, nor is it a term for romance and love. Instead, it is the core of our being, the hub of our personality and the source of a lot of things we would otherwise ascribe to our mind.¹

B. Over the years I've collected a handful of descriptions of the heart.

1. It is an amalgamation of ideas, beliefs, values, feelings, and memories.

2. It is the interior motivational structure that produces behavior.

3. It is not just the seat of our emotions, it is also the place we do our thinking,² willing and decision making.
 4. It is the source of our fundamental commitments, hopes, and trust.
- C. Blaise Pascal - the 17th-century French philosopher's - famously summarized all of this when he said: "We know the truth not only through reason but also through the heart... The heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing." So, the heart is bigger and more important than our mind.
- D. Dallas Willard suggested that, "what the heart trusts, the mind justifies, the emotions desire, and the will carries out." In other words, it all starts with our heart.
- E. So, think of the heart as Command Central.
- F. I appreciate the way Jonathan Haidt frames it. In his book, *The Happiness Hypothesis*, Haidt, a New York University social psychologist, a liberal Jewish atheist professor and a best-selling author – writes about an insight that struck him while he was riding on the back of an elephant. What he realized was that even though he had the reins and was technically in charge, the elephant would only comply when it didn't have desires of its own. He says, "When the elephant really wants to do something, I'm no match for him."
- G. Haidt goes on to claim that this is the way our mind and heart interact – that our mind is the rider and our heart is the elephant, and the heart is only going to comply with the mind if that is what it wants.
- H. So, the first thing to know about our heart is that it is command central.
- V. The second thing to know about our heart is that it is broken:
- A. I'm not talking about romance at the moment. Maybe yours is. Sorry, that is no fun. But I am using the term "broken heart" in a different way. I'm talking about sin. I'm restating the second of the four big aspects of our identity: the idea that we are deeply fallen.
 - B. You might think I'd leave this alone, but I was reading a book yesterday about the founding of our country – it's a new book by a Wheaton history professor called, *We the Fallen People*, and his main thesis is that the founders shaped the government the way they did – dividing power - because they believed we are very broken and not to be trusted. And they didn't have that high of a view of democracy, because the vote of all the people is just the vote of a bunch of sinful, selfish people.
 1. C.S. Lewis says it better – as he almost always does: I am a democrat because I believe in the Fall of Man. I think most people are democrats for the opposite reason. A great deal of democratic enthusiasm descends from the ideas of people like Rousseau, who believed in democracy because they thought mankind so wise and good that everyone deserved a share in the government. ... The real reason for democracy is just the reverse. Mankind is so fallen that no man can be trusted with unchecked power over his fellows
 - C. Yes. We cannot forget, our heart is bent.
 1. The prophet Jeremiah said it "is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?"

2. In Matthew 15, Jesus told the disciples the same thing. The Pharisees had attacked Jesus for not undergoing the ritual cleansing they were so big on. All of these purification rites to not be defiled. And Jesus says, “spiritually speaking, the problem isn’t germs.” They had pages and pages of rules about how to wash your hands to be pure.

3. Don’t you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? But the things that come out of a person’s mouth come from the heart.... And it’s out of the heart that we get evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what defile a person; but eating with unwashed hands is not the source of our spiritual problems.

D. Please hear me, our problems – your problems - are not principally from outside influences (e.g., the culture, Hollywood, whatever).

1. Those influences are not helpful. But our problems do not start there, they start with our broken heart.

2. Those who think their problems come from a lack of understanding and those who think their problems are from outside influences are both wrong.

3. The Bible suggests the real problem is our sinful nature – it is what lies within us.³ Our problem is our heart. And it is a problem with a problem because the suggestion is, we seldom see our situation accurately. Our broken heart deceives us.

VI. I am making this a third point. One: Our heart is command central; Two: it is broken: Three: it deceives us.

A. It would be bad enough if we had a problem and knew it. What the Bible says is, we have a problem but often do not know it.

B. I just mentioned Jeremiah’s famous passage – the heart is deceitful above all things. Realize, the point Jeremiah is making is not that sin is deceitful, but that our heart deceives us.

C. David suggests that same thing when – in Psalm 51 - he asks God to search his heart and see if there is any wickedness in him. He realizes that he is often unable to see the sin in his own life.

D. My experience as a pastor is that lots of people live in denial about the true state of their heart. And my experience as a person is that it takes a lot of work – unpleasant work - to pull the curtain back on my own life far enough for me to see myself.

1. On two occasions as an adult – once in my twenties and once and once in my forties - I went to see a therapist because I was eventually persuaded (by friends, mostly by Sheri) that I was not seeing myself – or situations - very accurately

E. Understand, our ability to rationalize our own behavior is nearly limitless.

1. In his book, *The Honest Truth About Dishonesty: How We Lie to Everyone – Especially Ourselves*, professor Dan Ariely at Duke notes that people lie for two basic reasons:

a) first, for selfish gain – i.e., we want something so much that we are willing to lie, cheat or deceive to get it;

- b) and second, to be able to look in the mirror and think well of ourselves.
2. He points out that these two motivations are in obvious conflict. How can we enable selfish deceit on the one hand but at the same time view ourselves as honest and good people? Airely writes that this is where our “amazing cognitive flexibility” comes into play.
3. What Airely calls our “amazing cognitive flexibility,” and what we more frequently refer to as rationalization, Jeremiah identifies as a deceitful heart, and Paul - in Romans 1 - calls “suppressing the truth.”⁴
- F. The Duke study confirms what the Bible has said for 2,000 years: we are not just broken, but we are broken in ways that hide our brokenness from ourselves.
- G. So, let me be sure we are on the same page here. I am saying:
1. One: The heart is command central. Two: it is broken. Three: it’s broken in ways that make it hard for us to see that it is broken. It gives us false readings. We cannot trust the gauges on the dash board.
 2. Men and women, our culture is telling you exactly the opposite. It says, “look inside yourself for truth.” The Bible is saying, “your heart is deceptive.” Houston, we have a problem. And we not only have a problem, we have a problem rightly understanding our problem.
- H. And it’s slightly worse than that.
- VII. Number Four: Untended, our heart grows worse.
- A. I can imagine, some of you are leaning over to the person next to you and saying, “This guy doesn’t get invited to any parties. I’m sure of it. What a kill joy! What a giant Eye Ore.”
- B. Don’t shoot the messenger. I hate to pile on the bad news, but you need to know that hearts – which are already a problem – left unattended, get worse over time. If we do not take action, they grow colder and harder and more calloused.
- C. Please understand, if we confess our sins, we are forgiven. But, even if we do confess our sin there is often an impact, some consequences and some longer-term residual issues.
1. As I have noted before, whatever we do today – good and bad – is easier to do tomorrow. Right. Whatever we do once is easier to do twice, especially sin.
 2. The more we sin the more we are inclined to sin, in part because the deeper into sin we need to travel to generate the same thrill as before. Why? Because our hearts are more calloused.
- D. I’m saying two things here:
1. First, do it once and you are likely to do it twice.
 2. And second, sin has some sort of cumulative and desensitizing effect on our conscience.⁵
- E. On top of this, let me add two more observations:

1. Life in a broken world has a callousing effect. You do not need to be an active agent in sin for your heart to grow calloused, life in a broken world will harden your heart – will make you jaded - unless you are fighting against it.
2. And, it's pretty hard to get it hard heart soft again. It takes work.

VIII. OK, so we have our four points. The heart is: 1) command central; 2) broken; 3) deceitful; and 4) likely to grow harder and colder over time.

IX. So what do we do? We realize that Jesus direction to love God with our heart takes work.

A. We have to work to love God well. We have to work to open up our hearts to the Holy Spirit. We have to work to soften our heart from the cumulative impact of sin. We have to work to order our loves so we are not misled by idols.

X. To that end, I am adding – you are not a pawn in what happens to your heart. Take some steps in the right direction.

A. Some say, we love what we love. We need to be honest with ourselves, look inside ourselves and be true to our inner voice. We must not suppress what we feel. As noted, this is the prevailing view of the moment. What the Bible says is: “guard your heart” and set it on Christ in heaven.

B. A while ago I happened up on young girl throwing a tantrum in the grocery store – full melt down mode.

1. Sheri and I are sympathetic with parents when their kids do this because we had a child who threw a few public tantrums. We stopped counting at about 700. And so, we know how frustrating and embarrassing it is.

2. We knew not to ever give in because then you do you reinforce the tantrum. The problem is, our didn't know this. People would offer helpful advice from time to time, and say, “you know, if you do not give in they will figure out that this behavior doesn't work and stop.” Thank you. Would you tell him that! But don't get too close, because he is a monster and he may bite your face off.

3. We are sympathetic with parents who are not throwing a counter tantrum.

4. Well, this mom was being very calm. And she was mostly waiting it out. At one point she said, “You need to stop screaming and get up off the floor and behave.” And the girl yelled, “You can't tell me how to feel.”

- a) Wow, sounds like she's already been to college.

5. And the Mom said, “I'm not telling you how to feel, I'm telling you how to behave.”

C. OK, sounds good. Sounds like Mom is going to get good-Mom points, except, note that Solomon in Proverbs 4 and Paul in Colossians 3 say something different. They tell us to guard our heart and to direct it.

1. The Book of Psalms is also full of this language. The Psalmist talks to himself, directs his heart. “Be still my soul.” That is not a prayer, that is an effort to shape how he feels.

2. We need to understand that we can say no to our heart.

D. Wait, I thought you told me the heart was like an elephant that will do what it wants.

1. Yes, the analogy is not perfect. But let's stay with it. The elephant is prone to do what it wants, but we are not entirely powerless. There are things we can do – things we do have some control over – that over time start to shape the elephant to want to go in the right direction. This is where spiritual disciplines kick in. This is where a Rule of Life – like what Anson spoke about in Friday's devotion – kicks in.

E. There are actually several things I might say here: read the Bible, memorize Scripture, meditate on the Gospel.

1. There are ways we can guard our heart – steer the elephant. These are mostly things to avoid and habits to develop.

2. Spiritual growth is not a mystery. It's not rocket science. You know the kinds of things that move you more fully into God.

3. Prayer, reading the Bible, serving others, meditating on Scripture, showing up at church, being baptized and taking communion, being generous with your money, having deep conversations with good friends, having accountability with people.

4. We are not flying blind. We have the Bible, the example of Christ, 2000 years of millions of people seeking to follow Christ, many of them earnestly doing so and then writing about what they have learned.

XI. But I want to focus on just one thing today. I said I would ask you to do something radical. Let me give you a specific challenge.

A. Earlier this week Ben Dockery and I hosted a dinner discussion with some academics about pluralism in higher education.

1. As you may have heard, in 2022 we intend to start an institute at Christ Church that will provide ways for deeper study and vocational discipleship and some explorations into public theology. It's very much in a developmental stage.

2. But we hosted a dinner as a pilot to explore some directed conversations about important topics – and this one was about how we are going to get along. How the country and society and institutions hold it together now that we have a groups of people with very different world views and deep differences.

3. And so over the last couple weeks I have been reading a lot about what is going on and from some Christian leaders about what they think will happen and should happen.

4. An interesting topic for another day.

B. The point is, there were a few college presidents and Trustees and Provosts and faculty – from schools around the country – talking about this moment. And some of the unique challenges of this moment.

C. And one of the people there – who had been involved in a major study on Christians in the US and Pluralism – said, in recent years the equation was flipped. It used to be that people were shaped by faith and then their faith shaped their politics. Today it is more likely to be the other way around – our politics shapes our faith.

D. That is not a new revelation per se – it is new to see data suggesting it's true.

E. But it led me to set down this challenge. Try going a month where you are more shaped by Scripture than you are by talk radio or social media.

F. Unplug from the sources designed – and increasingly we know they are being designed, the algorithms are being designed – to make us scared or angry. And be shaped by the Word of God.

G. Look, I don't know if you are addicted to social media or your smart phone or not. It seems likely that you are. And I do not know what your news sources are – but I know that we listen to shapes our heart. And we need to be more intentional about controlling who we let direct us.

XII. Please hear me. I have no political agenda here. I am not calling out specific sources, because I think the problem goes in both directions. And I am not saying you can never use your smart phone. What I am suggesting is that you dial things back, and try – for a month (maybe you will only do this for a week – but try to listen more to Jesus than you do to talk radio or engage in social media.

XIII. Learn to not look at your phone or the TV for at least the first hour of the day, and instead, read the Gospels. Pray. Write out a Psalm.

A. Some of you will not be able to go an hour. OK, when you realize you can't – try going 30 minutes.

B. Let's at least begin to understand the problem.

C. Who is shaping your heart. It needs to be directed to love God and others. If it is being filled with worry and anger and hate, you are doing the Christian life wrong.

¹ The web site Got Questions, includes the following quote while explaining, What are the causes and solutions for a hardened heart: Scripture informs us that grief ([John 14:1](#)); desires ([Matthew 5:28](#)); joy ([Ephesians 5:19](#)); understanding ([Isaiah 6:10](#); [Matthew 13:15](#)); thoughts and reasoning ([Genesis 6:5](#); [Hebrews 4:12](#); [Mark 2:8](#)); and, most importantly, faith and belief ([Hebrews 3:12](#); [Romans 10:10](#); [Mark 11:23](#)) are all products of the heart. Also, Jesus tells us that the heart is a repository for good and evil and that what comes out of our mouth – good or bad – begins in the heart ([Luke 6:43–45](#)).

² Genesis 6:5; Prov. 23:7; Daniel 2:30

³ James 4:17

⁴ Cited in John Ortberg's *Soul Keeping: Caring for the Most Important Part of You*. Zondervan, 2014, p. 74.

⁵ Paul speaks of a seared conscience in I Tim. 4:12