

# PREACHING TO THE MIND TO TRANSFORM THE HEART

## INTRODUCTION

Preaching ought to change lives.

As **John MacArthur** wrote, “*True biblical preaching ought to be a life-changing endeavour.*”<sup>1</sup>

This is evident in the greatest sermon ever preached, the Sermon on the Mount, as Jesus said in **Matthew 7:24-27**—

**24 “Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine and does them, may be compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock.**

**25 And the rain descended, and the rivers came, and the winds blew and fell against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded on the rock.**

**26 And everyone hearing these words of Mine and not doing them, may be compared to a foolish man who built his house on the sand.**

**27 And the rain descended, and the rivers came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and it fell—and great was its fall.”**

**Mike Fabarez** is correct, then when he argues that—

“*Jesus’ goal in preaching was to produce a ‘life-changing’ experience.*”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John MacArthur, foreword to *Preaching That Changes Lives*, by Michael Fabarez (Nashville, TN: T. Nelson Publishers, 2002), vii.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Fabarez, *Preaching That Changes Lives* (Nashville, TN: T. Nelson Publishers, 2002), x–xi.

He is not the only one to understand Jesus' point that preaching ought to change the lives of those who hear.

Jesus' brother, James, evidently thought of the Sermon on the Mount not only as the greatest sermon ever preached, but also as his favourite sermon because his epistle is essentially an exposition of Jesus' sermon.

James clearly understood the purpose of preaching when he wrote in **James 1:22-25**—

**22 But become doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves.**

**23 For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror;**

**24 for once he looked at himself and has gone away, he immediately forgot what kind of person he was.**

**25 But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of freedom, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this man will be blessed in what he does.**

Therefore, **Fabarez** ably summarises the biblical purpose of preaching when he writes—

*“Biblical preaching always aims to change lives.”<sup>3</sup>*

We can add a little more substance to that as we consider **Jay Adams'** statement that, *“The purpose of preaching... is to effect changes among the members of God's church that build them up individually and that build up the body as a whole.”<sup>4</sup>*

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<sup>3</sup> Fabarez, *Preaching That Changes Lives*, xii.

<sup>4</sup> Jay E. Adams, *Preaching with Purpose: The Urgent Task of Homiletics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986), 13.

In saying that preaching ought to change lives, I trust that I am merely restating what you already believe.

That is particularly the case with the kind of preaching that most, if not all, of us would affirm as the biblical model of preaching—that it, expository preaching.

That is evident in my favourite definition of preaching that comes to use from **T. H. L. Parker** in his book on Calvin's preaching.

**He writes**, "*Expository preaching consists in the explanation and application of a passage of Scripture.*

*Without explanation it is not expository; without application it is not preaching.*"<sup>5</sup>

One more, I trust that I am not saying anything controversial.

In fact, I am certain that I am echoing your convictions and aspirations when it comes to your own preaching.

We would, therefore, all affirm the words of **Timothy Warren** when he says that, "*The process [of preaching] is not completed until God's people think and act differently for having heard the Word expounded.*"<sup>6</sup>

The question, therefore, that we are considering today is—  
how do we preach so that our sermons effectively change the lives of those who hear?

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<sup>5</sup> T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin's Preaching* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), 79.

<sup>6</sup> Timothy S. Warren, "A Paradigm for Preaching," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 148 (1991): 473.

Our focus in asking that question is clearly to narrow our consideration to the responsibility of the preacher in preaching life-changing sermons.

I acknowledge, though, the critical role of the Holy Spirit in the effectiveness of a sermon, and the oft-overlooked role of the listeners do what our own **Ken Ramey** describes as **“Expository Listening.”**

**As he writes**, *“Preaching is not a one-sided endeavour. It is a joint venture between the preacher and the listener...”*

*In order for you to receive the maximum benefit from the sermons you hear, you must partner with the preacher so that the Word of God accomplishes its intended purpose of transforming your life. Nothing creates a more explosive, electrifying, life-changing atmosphere than when the lightning bolts from a Spirit-empowered preacher hit the lightning rods of a Spirit-illuminated listener.”<sup>7</sup>*

We want to focus, though, narrowly on how you as the preacher ought to preach so that your sermons effectively change the lives of those who hear.

The answer to the question of how to preach so that lives are changed is that we must preach to the heart.

I am sure you have heard, and even repeated that sage advice.

However, my concern is that for as often as that counsel is repeated, many do not adequately understand what it means so that they can put it into practice in their sermons.

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<sup>7</sup> Ken Ramey, *Expository Listening* (The Woodlands, TX: Kress Biblical Resources, 2010), 3–4.

As is often the case, I find that when a growing concern drives me to careful thought and study, Jay Adams has already addressed the concern with his characteristic wisdom and insight.

So it is again that my study leads me to **Adams'** writings and a resonance with what he wrote in a small book,

***Preaching to the Heart***—

**He wrote**, *“For years homileticians have been exhorting preachers to ‘preach to the heart.’ But what are they talking about? Do you know? Do they?...”*

*The whole concept has been presented in such a vague and fuzzy way that anyone unfamiliar with it would find it difficult or impossible to obey the injunction.”<sup>8</sup>*

We cannot, as Adams warns, let the vagueness of the exhortation or our discouragement in its application lead us to conclude that preaching to the heart belongs only to the exceptionally gifted.

As we have already established, the purpose of every sermon we preach ought to be the changed lives of those who hear, and therefore our aim in every sermon is to preach to the heart.

But what I am asking you to consider today is that the reason why so many preachers fail to preach effectively to the heart is that they do not have a well-developed theology of the heart.

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<sup>8</sup> Jay E. Adams, *Preaching to the Heart* (Stanley, NC: Timeless Texts, 1983), 1.

Apart from the pretentious-sounding Latin phrase, *theologia cordis*, there is no formal term for the theology of the heart.

Personally, I think we should call it “heartology,” but since my sparse activity on social media confirms that I am not a trend setter, it’s unlikely to catch on.

In saying that we need to have a more robust theology of the heart, what I mean is that as preachers—and even as those who are listeners—

we need to have a more comprehensive understanding of what the Bible says about the human heart and how it functions.

In order to effectively preach to the heart, we need to have a biblical understanding of the heart.

In other words, to effectively preach for changed lives, we need to have a biblical understanding of how the heart changes.

My contention is that too often we are missing our mark as preachers and those who train preachers because we don’t have an adequate theology of the heart.

Without a well-developed “heartology” we cannot preach to the heart in order to change lives.

## PROPOSITION

Therefore, as we all strive to be more effective in our preaching, let's consider what the Bible says about the human heart and how it changes before considering the implications for expository preaching.

To give you an outline, I want to answer three important questions:

1. What is the heart?
2. How does it change?
3. How do we preach for heart change?

### 1. WHAT IS THE HEART?

As you know, the Bible says much about the heart.

When it does, it is not referring to the physical organ but to the control centre of a person and the seat for thoughts, attitudes, motivations, and actions.<sup>9</sup>

This is clearly what **Proverbs 4:23** teaches as Solomon writes:  
**<sup>23</sup> Guard your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life.**

Or as the NIV translates it to capture the sense:

**<sup>23</sup> Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.**

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<sup>9</sup> John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, eds., *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 419.

This is also reflected in the teaching of Jesus as He said in **Mark 7:20-23**—

20 **“That which proceeds out of the man, that is what defiles the man.**

21 **For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, sexual immoralities, thefts, murders, adulteries,**

22 **coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, and foolishness.**

23 **All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man.”**

That is why **Jay Adams** writes in his book, ***A Theology of Christian Counseling***, that the heart, “*is the source or treasure-house from which the outer words and actions spring.*”<sup>10</sup>

The most fundamental understanding of the heart, then, is that it is the control centre of our lives, influencing all that we do.

So far, so good. But this is far from all that the Bible teaches us about the heart, and if this is the sum and substance of your “heartiology” then you don’t have an adequate understanding of the heart in order to preach to it effectively.

At the most general level the Bible makes a distinction between the “outer” and the “inner” man.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Jay E. Adams, *A Theology of Christian Counseling: Introduction to Nouthetic Counseling* (Grand Rapids, MI: Ministry Resource Library, 1986), 115.

<sup>11</sup> Winston Smith, “Dichotomy or Trichotomy? How the Doctrine of Man Shapes the Treatment of Depression,” ed. David A. Powlison, *The Journal of Biblical Counseling*, Number 3, Spring 2000 18 (2000): 23.

The “inner” man refers to the level of thoughts, desires, and will and is synonymous with man’s “spirit”.

The multifaceted nature of the inner man is usually encapsulated in the term “heart.”

The “outer man” refers to actions and words that can be observed.

It consists of the physical body which is subject to decay and carries out the desires of the inner man through its “members.”

We can see this basic distinction in a Scripture text like **1 Samuel 16:7** where we read—

**<sup>7</sup> Yahweh said to Samuel, “Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but Yahweh looks at the heart.”**

It’s also evident as Paul writes in **2 Corinthians 4:16**—

**<sup>16</sup> Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day.**

While the Bible has many, varied terms to describe the inner man,

“heart” is the Bible’s all-inclusive term to refer to our unified and rich nature within.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Craig Troxel, *With All Your Heart: Orienting Your Mind, Desires, and Will toward Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 19.

While the Bible uses this term to distinguish between the inner and outer man, it also clearly describes the inner man, the “heart” of man, as ultimately directing the behaviour of the outer man.

We see this in **Proverbs 27:19**—

**<sup>19</sup> As in water face reflects face, so the heart of man reflects man.**

Theologians refer to the biblical idea that man is composed of two elements—outer and inner man, or body and spirit—as anthropological dichotomy.<sup>13</sup>

While the distinction between these two components is helpful to identify what the Bible means by the term “heart,” it should not lead us to believe that the heart of man is simplistic.

The inner competent of man is wonderfully complex and it is this complexity that we frequently fail to take into account in our theology of the heart.

We encounter this complexity in the foundational Old Testament text of **Deuteronomy 6:4-5**—

**<sup>4</sup> Hear, O Israel! Yahweh is our God, Yahweh is one!**

**<sup>5</sup> You shall love Yahweh your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.**

We shouldn't misunderstand this to be Moses teaching some kind of trichotomous anthropology.

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<sup>13</sup> Robert Duncan Culver, *Systematic Theology: Biblical and Historical* (Ross-shire, UK: Mentor, 2005), 271.

Rather, his point is to call for absolute and singular devotion to Yahweh.<sup>14</sup>

As commentator **Gary Millar** explains—

*“The ‘heart’ was not seen as the seat of emotions as in current usage, but of the sum total of human capacities and personalities, including the will;*

*the ‘soul’ is a similarly broad term that often has the nuance of ‘life’;*

*‘[might]’ again implies ‘with all my resources.’”<sup>15</sup>*

This is why **Daniel Block** in his comprehensive works on Deuteronomy has argued that we should understand Moses command in the sense of the following translation—

*“So demonstrate love for YHWH your God with your whole heart, and with your entire being, and with all your resources.”*

In particular, **Block** emphasises that—

*“The Hebrew word ‘heart’ often functions metaphorically for the seat of the emotions and will, but equally often it refers to the ‘mind’ or the seat of thought.*

*Here the word serves comprehensively for one’s inner being, including the ‘heart’ and ‘mind.’”<sup>16</sup>*

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<sup>14</sup> Daniel I. Block, *The Gospel according to Moses: Theological and Ethical Reflections on the Book of Deuteronomy* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012), 294.

<sup>15</sup> J. Gary Millar, *Deuteronomy*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander, Thomas R. Schreiner, and Andreas J. Köstenberger, *Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Academic, 2025), 183.

<sup>16</sup> Daniel I. Block, *The NIV Application Commentary: Deuteronomy*, ed. Terry Muck (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 183.

This explains why when we find the command repeated by Jesus in the New Testament, it's expressed slightly differently in Greek.

For example, we read in **Matthew 22:37**—

<sup>37</sup> **[Jesus] said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.”**

Noting the change in the command from “all your might” to “all your mind,” **Leon Morris** comments that—

*“We should not make too much of this difference, for both ways of expressing it make the point that love for God should be wholehearted, involving all that we have and all that we are.”*<sup>17</sup>

Or as **Daniel Doriani** comments—

*“Jesus summons disciples to love God with their essential being—the heart—and with every faculty: mental, physical, and emotional.”*<sup>18</sup>

The point is not that the heart, soul, and mind represent separate entities of our inner nature.

To the contrary, they overlap and harmonise.

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<sup>17</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 563.

<sup>18</sup> Daniel M. Doriani, “Matthew,” in *Matthew–Luke*, ed. Iain M. Duguid, James M. Hamilton Jr., and Jay Sklar, vol. VIII, *ESV Expository Commentary* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 340.

What is critically important to our theology of the heart is that we not misunderstand these foundational texts to be teaching some sort of Greek philosophical dualism between our mind and heart.

Greek philosophy has already infected Western culture with too great of a divide between the heart and thinking.<sup>19</sup>

If we accept such a false and unbiblical division between our thoughts and our emotions, then we will be certain to preach ineffectively as a result of our defective “heartiology.”

Rather, as **Craig Troxel** explains in his exceptional book, ***With All Your Heart***—

*“The heart includes and encompasses the mind with all its cognitive abilities, like reasoning, meditating, remembering, and believing. This is why the words ‘heart’ and ‘mind’ often appear together in Scripture. In such instances, they are not being contrasted but coordinated. Often they are used synonymously.”*<sup>20</sup>

So while the Bible has many words that it uses in various contexts to refer to the inner man—words like soul, spirit, conscience—the word “heart” is the Bible’s most used word.

It may also be the most misused word in our culture, but it is nevertheless still the most appropriate word for us to describe our nature within.

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<sup>19</sup> Troxel, *With All Your Heart*, 18.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 32–33.

**Troxel** offers us a definition that helps us understand what the Bible teaches about the heart—

*“The heart is the governing centre of a person.*

*When used simply, it reflects the unity of our inner being, and when used comprehensively, it describes the complexity of our inner being—as composed of mind (what we know), desires (what we love), and will (what we choose).”<sup>21</sup>*

A definition like this not only represents a more rigorous theology of the heart, but it also allows us to develop our understanding of the heart further and, eventually, to consider the implications that a well-developed “heartiology” has for effective preaching.

As much as this is a helpful definition, it is hardly a new definition.

Recognising the complexity of the heart in what we can call three elements or three chambers, or even three functions or operations, has a long tradition in church history.

It is found in Augustine’s writings and later became the lifeblood of Puritan theology.

The threefold scheme of mind, desires, and will is used in the Westminster Larger Catechism.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Troxel, *With All Your Heart*, 21.

<sup>22</sup> The Larger Catechism, in *The Westminster Standards* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2018), Q. 99.

More recently, **Louis Berkhof** used it in his **Systematic Theology** when he wrote—

*“Sin does not reside in any one faculty of the soul, but in the heart, which in Scriptural [language] is the central organ of the soul, out of which are the issues of life.*

*And from this centre its influence and operations spread to the intellect, the will, the affections, in short, to the entire man, including his body.”<sup>23</sup>*

It appears in the **Evangelical Dictionary of Theology** as the author writes that—

*The heart is “the centre or focus of inner personal life.... [The heart] is associated with the cognitive, affective, and volitional elements of personal life.”<sup>24</sup>*

This rigorous and well-developed understanding of the heart has been picked up and applied by various authors to biblical counselling concerns.

For example, **Nate Brooks** in his helpful book, **Identifying Heart Transformation**, writes—

*“Thinking, desiring, and choosing are operations of the heart, but are not entities in themselves. The heart produces thought, the heart produces desires, and the heart produces choices. But reasoning, desiring, and choosing... are all processes or functions or operations, not actual things inside of us.”<sup>25</sup>*

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<sup>23</sup> L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1938), 233.

<sup>24</sup> Owen Rupert Brandon, “Heart,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Daniel J. Treier and Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic: A Division of Baker Publishing Group, 2017), 370.

<sup>25</sup> Nate Brooks, *Identifying Heart Transformation: Exploring Different Kinds of Human Change* (Wapwallopen, PA: Shepherd Press, 2023), 36.

He is clearly referring to the threefold scheme of mind, desires, and will to describe the way the heart works, even as he rightly reminds his readers of the unity of the inner man.

Similarly, **Jeremy Pierre** writes in his book, ***The Dynamic Heart in Daily Life***, that—

*“Though Scripture speaks of the heart as a unified object, it describes it three-dimensionally. The heart is alive and dynamic, functioning in a multifaceted way....*

*The human heart responds cognitively, through rational processes based on knowledge and beliefs. It also responds affectively, through a framework of desires and emotions. It also responds volitionally, through a series of choices reflecting the wilful commitments of the heart.*

*Thinking, feeling, and choosing are complex, dynamic heart responses.”<sup>26</sup>*

It shouldn't surprise us at all that our preaching is helped by the efforts of those who spend significant time counselling people.

As Jay Adams and others have frequently observed, biblical counselling improves preaching by making it more applicational and practical, while expository preaching keeps counselling deeply theological and biblical.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Jeremy Pierre, *The Dynamic Heart in Daily Life: Connecting Christ to Human Experience* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2016), 16.

<sup>27</sup> Jim Newheiser, “The Relationship Between Preaching and Counseling,” *Servants of Grace*, October 25, 2018, <https://servantsofgrace.org/the-relationship-between-preaching-and-counseling/>.

My argument is that with a more biblically faithful answer to the question of ‘What is the heart?’,

we are able to develop a more detailed understanding of how the heart changes so that we can explore the implications of this rich, robust theology of the heart for expository preaching.

To put it simply, with a better “heartiology” we are better positioned to preach effectively as we understand the threefold operation of the heart through the mind, desires, and will.

## 2. HOW DOES THE HEART CHANGE?

As we come to the second question, we want to press deeper into this biblical undertaking of the heart.

Particularly, we want to understand how the heart—operating through the mind, desires, and will—is transformed.

Once more, it’s worth mentioning that this question can certainly be answered more comprehensively as we consider the way God transforms the human heart through His sovereign work of salvation that encompasses regeneration, sanctification, and glorification.

What we are narrowly considering, however, is how God transforms the heart through His ordinary means in progressive sanctification?

That is, how does the Bible describe the progressive change of our hearts?

To lay the foundation that will allow us to answer this question, let's consider what Pierre calls "the dynamic heart in daily life."

That is, let's consider how the three operations of the heart work together within the inner man.

We must keep in mind, though, that as we simplify the way the heart works, and therefore the way the heart changes, that this simplification is only an accommodation of our understanding.

The reality is that the functioning of the heart is complex as the mind, desires, and will are inseparable entangled in their unified operations.

As **Pierre** correctly states—

*"Thinking, feeling, and choosing are different perspectives on the same, singular function. These three functions are necessarily interrelated."*<sup>28</sup>

So as we press deeper into this biblical undertaking of the heart, we recognise the interrelated functions of the mind, desires, and will.

**The mind functions cognitively**—it is the aspect of our hearts that does the thinking, knowing, believing, reasoning, remembering, and interpreting.

**The desires function affectively**—they do the desiring, valuing, feeling, and emoting.

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<sup>28</sup> Pierre, *The Dynamic Heart*, 16.

**The will functions volitionally**—it does the willing, deciding, choosing, intending, committing, and acting, which also includes the speaking.

All of these are inseparably intertwined, but for the sake of our understanding and comprehension, we'll refer to the functions with more simplicity.

**First**, let's think of the mind simply and separately.

A central feature of our experience as humans is cognition—our ability to think, gain knowledge, process information, affirm truths, and interpret new realities through the lens of our existing beliefs.

To a significant degree, people are defined by what they know and believe.

We find this affirmed by the biblical authors.

For example, in **Matthew 9:4** we read—

**<sup>4</sup> And Jesus knowing their thoughts said, “Why are you thinking evil in your hearts?”**

**Luke 9:47**—

**<sup>47</sup> But Jesus, knowing what they were thinking in their heart, took a child and stood him by His side.**

Paul understands the cognitive aspect of the heart with profound insight as he writes in **2 Corinthians 4:6**—

**<sup>6</sup> For God, who said, “Light shall shine out of darkness,” is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.**

He applies the same principle to unbelievers whose hearts are corrupted by sin, as he writes in **Ephesians 4:18**—

<sup>18</sup> **being darkened in their mind, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart.**

Therefore, we can conclude that the thoughts of people's hearts are of monumental importance to the trajectory of their lives.

**Second**, let's think of the desires simply and separately.

Another feature of human experience is affection—  
our desires, loves, and emotions.

Strong desires and emotions motivate people.

Once again, we find that people are defined by what they love, desire, and feel.

We find Jesus affirming the emotional function of our hearts as He said in **Matthew 5:28**—

<sup>28</sup> **I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.**

Again in **Matthew 6:21**—

<sup>21</sup> **Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.**

In reference to a negative emotion, we read in **John 14:1**—

<sup>1</sup> **“Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me.”**

Paul also recognised the affective function of our hearts as he spoke of his emotions in **Romans 10:1**—

**<sup>1</sup> Brothers, my heart's desire and my prayer to God for [the Jews] is for their salvation.**

It is here where we find the influence of idols on the human heart.

In **Colossians 3:5**, Paul lists a number of sins that have two things in common—they are all sexual in nature, and they are all related to our desires.

He writes—

**<sup>5</sup> Therefore, consider the members of your earthly body as dead to sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which is idolatry.**

From this we can say that a good desire becomes a bad desire when it becomes a ruling desire.

That is, an idol is something that you are willing to sin in order to get, willing to sin in order to keep, or willing to sin if you don't get.

The key is to see that idols are things, often good things, that we love too much.

Again, we must conclude that alongside the thoughts of people's hearts, their desires are of monumental importance to the trajectory of their lives.

**Third**, let's think of the will simply and separately.

Yet another feature of human experience is volition—our intentions and choices.

Throughout each day, people constantly make decisions.

These choices do not arise in isolation—they flow out of the deeper commitments of the heart.

Whether they are fully aware of our deeper ideas and desires or not, the heart's intentions shape and direct a person's actions.

I'm sure you see the pattern, but we find that people are significantly defined by what choose to be and do.

Scripture affirms this reality, as when Jesus said in **Matthew 15:18**—

**<sup>18</sup> But the things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and those defile the man.**

Peter said to Ananias in **Acts 5:4**—

**<sup>4</sup> Why is it that you laid this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God.**

Paul applies this profoundly in **Romans 2:5** when we writes—

**<sup>5</sup> But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God.**

People have active wills that direct their speech and behaviour.

Once more, we conclude that the intentions of people's hearts are of monumental importance to the trajectory of their lives.

But how do these three operations work together in the heart, especially as they produce changed lives?

We remember that the functioning of the heart is complex as the mind, desires, and will are inseparably entangled in their unified operations.

Nevertheless, let's consider the primary way in which they work together.

The primary way in which the heart operates is from the mind, to the desires, and then the will.

In other words, the primary way the heart works is that changed thinking produces changes desires which, in turn, produce changes actions.

Let me illustrate with the amazing story of God's grace in the conversion of Rosaria Butterfield.

Rosaria was a former lesbian feminist scholar whose specialty was "queer theory" and who was engaged in a long-term same-sex relationship.

She experienced what she calls a "train wreck conversion"—  
a dramatic, costly surrender to Christ that upended her entire identity, career, and relationships.

She left her former life behind, eventually marrying Kent Butterfield, a Reformed Presbyterian pastor.

What makes a rabid feminist who believes that men are everything that is wrong with the world choose to get married?

{EXPAND}

There are two key texts in the New Testament which, I believe, establish the mind as the primary operation through which God changes the heart.

To begin with, let's consider **Romans 12:2**—

**<sup>2</sup> And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may approve what the will of God is, that which is good and pleasing and perfect.**

To “approve” the will of God means to understand and agree with what God wants of us so that we put it into practice.<sup>29</sup>

It means to “discern-and-do the will of God.”

Simply, it means to live life God's way.

But as Paul explains, the transformation of a believer's life so that they live life God's way begins with the transformation, or renewal, of the mind.

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<sup>29</sup> Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, ed. Ned B. Stonehouse et al., Second Edition, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018), 776.

There is a cognitive process that leads to transformed affections and transformed actions.

In other words, as we preach to change lives, we preach to the heart.

The change begins particularly within the mind,  
so that as there is a change is what the believer thinks and believes about God and what He wants from us it produces a change in desires that ultimately produce a change in the will so that there is a new, Christlike conduct.

The other text that we have to consider is Paul's paradigm for change in **Ephesians 4:22-24**—

<sup>22</sup> **to lay aside, in reference to your former conduct, the old man, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit,**

<sup>23</sup> **and to be renewed in the spirit of your mind,**

<sup>24</sup> **and to put on the new man, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth.**

As Paul describes the transformation of the believer from the “old man” to the “new man,” he uses three infinitives to describe the process:

- Lay aside/ put off
- Be renewed
- Put on

However, Paul's three infinitives should not lead us to conclude that Paul is describing a three-step process of change.

Paul uses the grammar of the three infinitives to communicate the primacy of the mind's renewal.

The “put off/ put on” infinitives are in the aorist form, while the “be renewed” infinitive is in the present form.

What I believe Paul is doing is—as a number of commentators and grammarians have suggested—placing the emphasis on the renewal of the mind as the overall process of change.<sup>30</sup>

As **Harold Hoehner** comments—

*“The present tense suggests that the renewal of the mind is a repeated process throughout the believer's life.”*<sup>31</sup>

The putting off and putting on are the actions that support this process.

In simpler terms, the discrete, step-by-step actions of change are described as putting off sinful behaviour and putting on righteous behaviour, and the cognitive transformation of the heart's thinking is what drives the process.

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<sup>30</sup> See Constantine R. Campbell, *Basics of Verbal Aspect in Biblical Greek* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2024), 137–138. Constantine R. Campbell, *Basics of Verbal Aspect in Biblical Greek* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2024), 95, 137–138.

“The infinitives ἀποθέσθαι (“to put off”) and ἐνδύσασθαι (“to put on”) in verses 22 and 24 do not denote progress of action, since they are aorist forms, whose grammatical aspects are undefined. On the other hand ἀνανεοῦσθαι (“to be renewed”) appears in the present tense, which here denotes continuous action.” René A. López, “Paul's Vice List in Ephesians 5:3–5,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 169, no. 673–676 (2012): 207.

<sup>31</sup> Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 607.

So as we step back and consider the complexity of how the heart works and the process by which it changes, we see that it involves the inseparably intertwined operations of the mind, desires, and will.

But we have also seen that the Bible describes the primary way in which the heart operates as from the mind, to the desires, and then the will.

In other words, the primary way the heart works is that changed thinking produces changes desires which, in turn, produce changes actions.

Therefore, we arrive at a critical conclusion—the rational, cognitive transformation of a believer’s mind is what produces a changed life.

In light of this conclusion, we must ask, what are the implications for preaching?

Given the way in which the heart works, how do we preach for change?

### 3. HOW DO WE PREACH FOR HEART CHANGE?

We have spent considerable time considering the theology of the heart, especially what the Bible teaches about the heart and how it changes.

With a well-developed “heartology,” we are now in a position to return to the matter of preaching to the heart in order to effectively change the lives of those who hear.<sup>32</sup>

It is particularly the primacy of the mind in the process of heart change that yields essential implications for our task of preaching for transformation.

Without a robust, biblical understanding of the heart, many preachers have been affected by the misconception that **Troxel** describes when he writes—

*“One of the most significant modern-day misconceptions about the heart—even among evangelical Christians—is that the heart is opposed to the head.”<sup>33</sup>*

This is further exacerbated by the anti-intellectualism of pop culture that has also spread to the evangelical church.

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<sup>32</sup> For one author’s attempt to relate the theology of the heart specifically to the task of preaching for change, see Murray Capill, *The Heart Is the Target: Preaching Practical Application from Every Text* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2014), 97–127.

<sup>33</sup> Troxel, *With All Your Heart*, 34.

As Troxel says—

*“Many Christians align the heart with the warm and emotional side of spirituality in opposition to the supposed coldness of theology.”<sup>34</sup>*

The end result is that when many pastors “preach to the heart,” they actually aim at the emotions, which is to say, they have a mystical approach to changing the lives of those who hear.

They craft shorter, lighter, more emotionally engaging sermons because they don’t see the mind as the means to a changed heart and a changed life, but as the obstacle.

The result is a mystical emphasis on emotions and experiences—spine tingles and liver shivers—because they believe that if they can only help their people “feel” closer to God then they will have accomplished their task in preaching.

And while we haven’t focussed on the listeners’ responsibilities, many Christians evaluate a sermon based on the same criteria.

They are not looking for a sermon filled with careful exegesis and substantial theology—they want to “feel” closer to God and experience the flood of warm, comforting emotion without the rigorous engagement of their minds in careful thought and evaluation.

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 18.

Then both preacher and people wonder why the church is immature and worldly, with little of the pure worship that Scripture describes as “the fear of the LORD.”

I hope that it is clear why the theology of the heart matters because a biblical “heartiology” is the much-needed corrective to this kind of ineffective preaching.

How do we preach to the heart, then?

We aim at the mind as we preach with careful exegesis and substantial theology because we recognise the mind as the means to a changed heart and a changed life.

A sound “heartiology” keeps this from being a cold, intellectualism because the mind is not the end.

We aim to use the rigours of biblical thinking and reasoning to engage the emotions and warm the affections so that as our people come to know God with more depth and maturity they will also love Him with the same.<sup>35</sup>

As their love for Him grows and develops into that holy, reverential, joyful form of worship called “the fear of the LORD,” it will naturally be expressed in the obedient exercise of the will to Christlike conduct.

To put it simply, what our people know will change what our people love, and what they love will change what they choose to do.

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<sup>35</sup> “The foundation of application is always the knowledge of God, Creator and Redeemer.”

Daniel M. Doriani, *Putting the Truth to Work: The Theory and Practice of Biblical Application* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2001), 54.

Therefore, we need to preach to the mind, not in distinction from the heart, but as the vital catalyst to wholehearted change of the thoughts, affections, and decisions.

## CONCLUSION

Preaching ought to change lives.

I believe that one of the leading reasons that modern preaching does not produce true, biblical change in the lives of the listeners is that preachers do not adequately understand the heart.

With a robust theology of the heart, the preacher knows that the only way to effectively preach for changed lives is to preach to the heart.

But contrary to the modern misconceptions and mystical predispositions that abound within the church,  
preaching to the heart means rigorously engaging the mind with careful exegesis and substantial theology.

As our people grow in their understanding of God, they will grow in their love for God, which will then produce a growth in their obedience to God.

So we preach to the mind in order to transform the whole heart.

That is how a preacher can preach effectively to change the lives of those who hear.