

What Is Your Problem? Part I

This is a fair and important question to ask, because unless you understand the problem, you will never know the remedy. What is present in your life that impedes your joy and contentment?

You may see the issue as *emotional*. Often we describe our pain as depression, fear, anxiety, anger, sadness, or grief. Certainly any of these emotions can be a real and present part of human suffering; but do the feelings you have truly *explain* what is wrong?

You may define your concern as *relational*. You might have marital discord, conflict with children or other family members. You could be facing a divorce, the loss of a friendship, or a difficult work environment. For some, relationships have been altered or ended by illness or death. Relationships can be problematic; people can be disappointing; and loss can be devastating. But is your life and well being *dependent* only on the circumstances around you?

You may believe your problem is *medical*. Today, there is great emphasis placed upon the genetic and medical influences of life. Many conditions are seen as inevitable due to genetic vulnerabilities and family history. Other problems are explained as illness or disease for which there is no explanation.

Many “experts” agree that bio-chemical imbalances are to blame for the emotions and behaviors that undermine one’s stability and affect the quality of one’s relationships. But even if there is truth to this claim, does a genetic vulnerability or chemical imbalance explain *everything* that is present and problematic in your life?

You could see your pain as *historical*. In other words, you feel and act the way you do *because* of your history and experiences in life. Perhaps you have endured a dysfunctional or abusive childhood. You could be the victim of crime, trauma, or other event that was extremely invasive and life altering. And while these injuries are in the past, they remain alive and active in your current life due to memories and feelings that remain unresolved. But is our present circumstance *dictated* by the experiences that came before?

Finally, you may perceive your difficulty as *circumstantial*. For example, you may believe that if your circumstance could be changed, you would improve. If you had a better job, a godlier spouse, obedient children, greater income, or lived in a different city, your problems could be answered. Given the challenge of your situation, you may believe you are *justified* in the way you feel and the actions you take. But is your internal contentment truly *dependent* upon your external environment?

“disease.” Tony requires his wife, children, friends, and employer to accommodate support group meetings, time spent with fellow “alcoholics,” and his singular focus on sobriety above all. Instead of speaking of God, Tony talks about his “higher power” that enables him to endure his addiction.

Bart is in a bad situation. Armed with a master’s degree and untold potential in business, he just cannot adjust to the urban lifestyle. Having grown up in the rural south, Bart is certain he would feel happy in a different environment. In the city people are rude, traffic is congested, real estate is expensive, and there are no women he considers worthy of matrimony.

If only Bart could get back to his “roots,” he would feel “normal” again. He thinks; “Maybe I was never cut out for business and finance. I need to escape the city and all these superficial people. Then I can get my life started again.”

Without notice he resigns his job, defaults on his lease, sells his furniture, and heads south... with no job, no plan, and no resources. At the age of 30, he moves into his old bedroom with his parents. A week of rest turns into six months, and Bart’s life is still *less* than he had imagined.

Cassandra has been depressed and anxious for years. She blames the depression for poor grades in college, an isolated social life, and a general inability to function productively in life. She has tried talking to friends, family, clergy, and counselors, but no one could understand. She has taken medication but realized only a small improvement. She has changed her college once, her major three times, and has been in and out of several “disappointing” relationships with men.

In the end, Cassandra sees no hope. In her mind, she has tried everything there is to try and yet her depression continues. She has decided to take her own life. As she writes a note to her parents and lays out the pills she will ingest, she anticipates the “peace” she longs for...a peace this world could not provide.

Based upon the assessment of your problems, what remedies have you considered or tried in the past? Did the selected solutions eliminate or cure your problem? Describe your actions and their outcomes below:

How does God define your problem?

The nature of human nature is to go our own way (Isa. 53:6). We believe our emotions and desires are reliable and, if followed, will lead us toward correct living. In short, we generally consider our thoughts and intentions are good, therefore our judgment is good. But God described the nature of the human heart through His prophet Jeremiah:

***The heart is deceitful above all things,
And desperately wicked;
Who can know it? (Jer. 17:9).***

Because of this heart condition, we humans are unable to fully diagnose ourselves. Our orientation is *external*. We believe the problems in our lives are due to other people, actions, and circumstances *outside* our control and influence. We invest great effort trying to change the situations and people around us, thinking this will bring the much-needed solution we seek.

But according to God's Word, a wicked, unknown heart deceives us: a heart that cannot fully see what God knows. For this reason, many will spend great time and energy in the pursuit of an incorrect cure. In essence, we want issues around us to be treated, while internally, we are dying from chronic heart failure. But while we are looking outward, God is conducting a different kind of evaluation. He looks internally to the heart and mind, rendering a true and accurate diagnosis:

***I, the LORD, search the heart,
I test the mind,
Even to give every man according to his ways,
According to the fruit of his doings (Jer. 17:10).***

We survey our environment; God searches the heart. We challenge the world to change; God tests our mind. If the human condition were dependent upon the world around us, why would our Heavenly Father place so much emphasis on the inner conditions of heart and mind?

Too often, we humans examine ourselves in contrast to the world. We look to see how others are living and conducting their lives and conclude, we are blameless in our difficulty. But when we scrutinize ourselves in contrast to God's Word, we employ a very different tool of measurement: one that is not biased or influenced by worldly definitions of what is, and is not, acceptable. God holds each of us equally accountable to His standards, commandments, and call.

The writer of Hebrews speaks of the power of Scripture to expose the deeper workings of the heart, rendering a perfect assessment of your true situation:

For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart (Heb. 4:12).

In Roman times, the “two edged sword” was a surgical instrument with blades on either side. Imagine the study of God’s Word as exploratory surgery. It yields information that cannot be discerned from an external examination only. When the believer applies this method of evaluation, access is gained to the true nature and purpose of the heart.

As long as we are focused on the errors of others, contrasting our status with theirs, we will miss God’s definition of the problem, and thereby, His provision of the cure. Only with an accurate diagnosis, can we be given the benefit of an exact and true remedy.

Examine the ways you have used the world as a measure of your spiritual condition. How have you been deceived by your own assessment? By examining God’s Word, how does your definition of the problem change?

There is more biblical evidence that the heart is central to correct problem assessment. Early in the earthly ministry of Jesus, the Pharisees complained that the disciples did not participate in the ceremonial washing of hands and vessels, before eating food. Their focus was on *external cleansing* and the keeping of traditions that superficially *convey* righteousness.

This orientation results in criticism and condemnation of others, chronic self-righteousness, and an inability to see what is important to our Lord and Savior. It promotes *activity over relationship* and *appearance over substance*. Observe Jesus’ response to the religious leaders:

***He answered and said to them,
“Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written:
‘This people honors Me with their lips,
But their heart is far from Me.
And in vain they worship Me,***

Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men” (Mark 7:6-7).

Here Jesus defines what is important. It matters less what we claim with our lips and more what we express through our heart. Ritual is “vain” worship: a standard and doctrine of man. Behavior, even *religious behavior*, cannot transform a heart.

A correct, connected, and surrendered heart, transforms behavior. As we focus on others, critiquing their behavior, and accepting the world’s definition of what is normal and healthy, we miss the opportunity for intimacy, correction, fulfillment, and worship with the Lord. While we meditate on the situation around us, we are blind to our own heart and oblivious to the fact that we are separated from Christ. In our distraction and division, we are alone and incapable of knowing His peace and sufficiency.

Jesus was clear that nothing in our external world can undermine our walk and obedience. He said:

“There is nothing that enters a man from outside which can defile him; but the things which come out of him, those are the things that defile a man” (Mark 7:15).

People and situations cannot “defile” the heart, nor do they produce sinful conduct. Instead, sin and its consequence, proceed from *within* producing our emotions, thoughts, and actions that defeat and undermine our unity with Christ and disconnect us from His Kingdom authority and power. Jesus points us back to the heart:

And He said, “What comes out of a man, that defiles a man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within and defile a man” (Mark 7:20-23).

We are defiled by our *internal* not our *external* condition. No matter the actions and injustices of others, we must ultimately find peace and unity with the Lord through the correction of our heart, rather than through the correction of people and situations.

Correct diagnosis comes through an understanding of the heart. Knowing where and how we are in discord with Christ will determine the actions needed to find restoration. The heart dictates our environment; our environment does not dictate our heart. Solomon wrote:

***Keep your heart with all diligence,
For out of it spring the issues of life (Prov. 4:23).***

Applying these principles of biblical truth, make a new assessment of your areas of concern. According to Scripture, what is the source of your difficulty? What is the solution? What must you do to reestablish your correct position with God?

In subsequent articles, we will explore the nature of human suffering and the transformational impact of an abiding life in Christ.