

Introduction



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

1 SAMUEL 16:7

A Heart Story from the Bible

Samuel was discouraged. He'd worked so hard to help King Saul do the right thing. But even though Saul started well, it was becoming more and more clear he wasn't the best one for the job. *If he'd only change. He could be such a good king. The people need him. I wish he'd follow the Lord.*

The Lord interrupted Samuel's thoughts. “It's time to move on, Samuel. I've rejected Saul as king. I want you to anoint someone else. Get things ready for a trip.”

Samuel recognized God speaking. After all, he'd been listening to the voice of the Lord ever since he was a child. So he obeyed the Lord and went to Bethlehem, where he met the family of Jesse. Samuel knew that it was from this family God would choose a new king. It would be his job to anoint God's chosen one. *I wonder which one of the boys God will choose to be the king?*

When Samuel saw Eliab, Jesse's oldest son, he knew he must be the one. He was tall and good-looking like Saul. He'd make a great leader for Israel. *He's the kind of person that people will follow.*

But wait. God interrupted his thoughts again. “Samuel,

there's something you don't understand. There's something I have to teach you."

Samuel paused and looked around at the family gathering in front of him. He was there with them, but his thoughts were in a different place, listening to God.

"Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance but the Lord looks at the heart."

Yes, it makes sense! Why didn't I realize it before? Sure, God's measuring stick is different. He looks at the heart. Oh, if I only would have seen that earlier; maybe I could have better prepared Saul as king. Maybe I could have challenged him more on a heart level. Yes, this is God's way. It's so important. This will change the way I work with people. God is interested in the heart!

Samuel continued to follow God's lead and discovered that David, who was just a boy at the time, was God's choice for a new king. Samuel anointed him, celebrated with the family for a while, then started on his way. That day, Samuel not only learned who'd be the next king of Israel, but he learned a little more about how God works with people. Samuel learned God is more interested in the heart than in outward appearance.

For the rest of Samuel's days, he, too, would think differently. He'd try to think about others the way God thinks about them. He wouldn't just look at their behavior. He'd consider their hearts.

(This story was taken from 1 Samuel 16:1-13.)

See with New Eyes

God wants to revolutionize our thinking about parenting. In the same way he challenged Samuel to adopt a completely different approach to identifying a king, God wants us to

embrace a foundational principle for our families.

God has a heart-based approach to working with people. This same truth changes many of the strategies and approaches parents use with their kids. God is interested in hearts because that's where real and lasting change takes place. In fact, when you direct your energies toward your child's heart, amazing things will happen.

Lou and Holly came to our office for family counseling. Their thirteen-year-old daughter, Kelly, did what they asked, but she usually had a bad attitude. She said she hated her parents because of the limits they placed on her. The walls in family dynamics were thick, and continual tension dominated their home. Lou and Holly wanted help.

We suggested trying a heart-based approach. Their blank stares revealed they had no idea what we were talking about, so we started at the beginning. Over several weeks, we trained these parents to think differently about parenting, but it wasn't easy. It seemed like every time we discussed a new dimension of family life or unpacked another problem, we discovered related problems that required a different way of thinking.

Lou and Holly had established habits of behavior modification with their daughter. "You can't go out until you clean your room." "We'll buy you some new clothes if you get better grades." Kelly expected a certain pattern from her parents, which made change all the more challenging. We offered a number of ideas and approaches to break the dangerous mold their daughter had grown accustomed to.



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Over several weeks, Lou and Holly made significant inroads into their daughter's heart. Small steps of improvement grew into occasional deeper conversations. The parents saw changes in Kelly's behavior, but more important, they could feel things improving on a deeper level. Cooperation around the house increased, and they even began receiving good reports about her from school. It took some time, but these parents made a major parenting shift, and all their hard work paid off dramatically. In our final session, Mom shared a touching story:



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"I had to confront Kelly because she missed an assignment at school. In the past, she would have attacked me with anger and accusations, refusing to accept responsibility, but this time was different. She said, 'I know. I made a mistake and procrastinated. I'm not going to do that again. I'm sorry!'"

"I was floored. I didn't know quite how to respond. She took me by surprise, so I said, 'Okay' and walked out."

"Later she came to me and said, 'Mom, I just want you to know I really am going to try harder at

school. Thanks for all you do for me.'"

"I felt like crying as I hugged her. It was one of those 'touching heart' moments that I'll always treasure."

Touching our kids' hearts is possible, but it takes some time and planning so we're ready for the opportunities when they come. Of course, many current parenting trends don't even acknowledge the heart. They emphasize behavior mod-

ification. “If you get your homework done, you can watch a movie tonight.” “If you kids keep fighting, you’ll have to play alone.” “If you clean your room, you can have a friend over.”

This approach of “Do what I say and I’ll let you have what you want” often misses the heart altogether. In fact, it has the opposite effect of what parents want. Behavior modification appeals to children’s resident selfishness. It may work at times, but it has a limited capacity to make lasting changes. Behavior modification gets old quickly. Parents find they must continually up the ante and offer bigger and bigger incentives to maintain the desired behavior. A focus on getting the right actions down teaches children image management. The message our children hear is that behavior is what’s important. Who cares about the heart?

It’s time for a heart revolution in parenting. Behavior modification often works for the short term, but it does little to mold a child’s heart for the future. It’s like building a house of cards. No foundation and no depth mean the child’s whole life could fall apart at any moment.

There’s much at stake in raising children. When we take a heart approach to parenting, we partner with God in raising a future generation. Children learn to make changes on the inside, not just outwardly. Those changes last and become the basis for conviction and values that our children will carry with them for the rest of their lives. A conscience develops to help guide them in decisions that involve right and wrong.

If you haven’t had much experience working with the heart, then you’re about to start a fascinating journey. You’re



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going to learn a different way of relating to your children. You'll discover opportunities to touch your kids on a deeper level.



**YOU CAN FORCE A
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CHANGE OF HEART.**

Motivating heart change isn't easy. You can force a child to change behavior, but you can't force a change of heart. It's a deeper work. Helping children change their hearts requires a lot of thought, planning, and prayer. More and more parents are relearning discipline so that they can have a lasting impact on their children.

Please don't think that a heart-based approach to discipline is all mushy and lenient. It's not.

Firmness and hard work produce character. The challenge is to help children change on a deeper level so they can become most effective in life.

So, where do you start? Let's look at the last two verses of the Old Testament, in which the prophet Malachi looks forward to what God will do in the last days. He wrote, "He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers."

Real heart solutions in children's lives start with your own heart as a parent. As you consider ways to touch your child's heart, it's our prayer that God will do a deeper work in your own heart as well. Sometimes God uses children to reveal significant issues in Mom and Dad's lives. Don't hesitate to put the book down and allow God to do a deeper work in you. One truth we see over and over again is that parents have to change before their children will change.

We find that parents long to connect with their kids. You'd

like to be close, but much of the work of family life wears on relationships. Getting the house cleaned up, finishing homework, making and cleaning up meals, and just keeping kids moving in the right direction all tax relationships. You want to connect on a deeper level, but it seems that much of life is working against you.

And the challenges seem to increase as kids get older. Teens need limits, but they're gone more, getting their social needs met outside of the home. Parenting battles become intense, and many parents spend the quiet moments resting up for the next challenge instead of looking for opportunities to connect on a heart level.

Some parents even lose the desire to be close to their children. Their kids have hurt, battered, and even abused them. These parents sometimes settle for the drudgery of getting through the day and have lost the vision for anything more significant. "You don't know my kids," they say.

After attending one of our weekend parenting seminars, one mom asked, "What you shared tonight was so practical and touching, but my kids are older. Is it too late?"

I could see the discouragement on her face. "How old are your children?"

"Seven and ten."

I smiled and assured her it wasn't too late. In fact, God changes people at all ages.

"But I thought the critical years were between birth and age five; by then a child's life is set."

Although it is true that children develop rapidly when they're young, and much of their character and personality takes shape at that age, the idea that children are hardened like concrete is a humanistic view of human growth. If you didn't believe in God, you'd be in rather sad shape when it comes to helping children change.

The reality is that God does miracles in people's lives every day. God's Word molds adults' character regularly, and



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the Holy Spirit can change even the most stubborn or rebellious person into someone who emulates Christ. It's never too late. Don't let anyone, including your children, convince you otherwise. God is in the business of changing people, and he uses parents as a primary tool to facilitate that change in children's lives.

Consider this interesting picture from the Old Testament. When God designed the clothes that the high priest wore, he told the craftsmen to inscribe the names of the twelve tribes of

Israel onto stones that they'd place on the breastplate so that "whenever Aaron enters the Holy Place, he will bear the names of Israel over his heart" (Ex. 28:29). There's a special application for parents in that verse.

We sometimes say children are a pain in the neck or they're getting in our hair. Try placing them over your heart. It's amazing what happens when you do. Kids notice the difference and respond accordingly. If you want your children to change their hearts, you must make praying for them a priority in your life.

Aaron entered the Holy Place to pray. The stones on the breastplate reminded him to pray for all those under his spiritual care. Pray for your children often. God not only works through prayer to change your kids, but he also uses your prayers to make you more sensitive to his work in their

hearts. In your prayer time, be sure to listen as well as talk. God may clarify a direction or reveal something to you about your child that you haven't seen before. Aaron wore a breastplate that contained a symbolic way to remember to keep the Israelites on his heart. You also probably have ways to do the same thing. If not, take some time and create them. You might consider a picture of your kids on the refrigerator or key chain, a Bible verse on your bathroom mirror, or a bracelet or piece of jewelry that reminds you to keep your kids on your heart and pray for them often. Prayer is one of the ways God uses to turn the hearts of the parents to their children.

One mom tells this story: "I felt alone. My kids hated me. They were disrespectful and hurtful to each other and to me. My husband did little to help. He didn't know what to do, so he withdrew. I couldn't imagine continuing at this rate for the next ten years until my kids were out of the house; I had to do something.

"The heart idea intrigued me. It seemed like a good plan, but, then again, I'd tried so many other good ideas that didn't seem to work. I knew I needed to make some changes in myself first. I prayed that God would change *my* heart, and he did! Then I began to look beyond behavior and see the hearts of my kids and what they needed on a deeper level. Step by step, I went to work, doing what I could to help my children change their hearts.

"At first, it seemed like an overwhelming task. But as I started to focus my energies, I saw change. I was encouraged to continue on, and great things started happening in our family. My husband saw that things were different and partnered with me in parenting. Together we continued to work.

"Life has dramatically changed in our home since last year. Instead of a battlefield every day, we now spend some

enjoyable relationship times together in our family. I actually like being with my kids, and they're enjoying our family more than ever. We still have to correct and set limits, but by focusing on our kids' hearts, we avoid the battles of the past. I'm so glad we stopped our family from becoming more hurtful and painful. God turned us around in some beautiful ways."

Yes, this is possible in your family too, and it all starts with the heart. As you read this book, you'll prepare yourself to be a tour guide for one of the greatest adventures your family will ever experience. It's our prayer that God will reveal to you a new way of looking at people, just like he did with Samuel. This parenting approach is exciting—in part because you're working with God in the most sacred place on earth: the heart.

As you begin a heart approach with your kids, don't be surprised if God does some deeper work in you as well. After all, God isn't just concerned about your children. He's eager to develop your heart too. So, let him work in and through you and great things will happen. Always remember that your heart is special; it's where God lives and works.

Prayer

Lord, please help me to see my kids the way you see them. Sometimes I get so focused on their behavior problems that I just react. I want to help my children make lasting changes. I want to touch their hearts. Please show me what that means. And Lord, I invite you to point out areas in my heart that need your special touch. I look forward to living life in this new dimension with your leadership. Amen.

Part 1

Understanding the Heart

*"Love the LORD your God with all your heart and
with all your soul and with all your strength."*

DEUTERONOMY 6:5

A Heart Story from the Bible



David had a dream in his heart. He wanted to build God a house. This was no ordinary house. It would be a magnificent work. *Yes, I will do it. I will build a temple for God. It will be my most important accomplishment.*

David had already set the stage. He had conquered Jerusalem and took it from the Jebusites. *Jerusalem should be the place where I build the temple.* He had fortified Jerusalem, and it became known as the City of David. Next, he had set up a tent and brought the ark to Jerusalem. *Yes, the next step is to build God a house. I can hardly wait.*

The Bible tells us David “set his heart” on building the temple. It was his passion—his dream. *I’m going to build God a beautiful house—nothing but the best in every way. Cedar from Lebanon. Gold, bronze, and silver will add the finishing touches. It will be the most magnificent building ever.*

One morning Nathan came to visit David with news. “David, the Lord told me last night that you are not the one to build the house for him.”

“What? But ... but ... I’ve got such a great idea for building his house.

“God says he’s had just a tent up to now, and it’s moved

from here to there for hundreds of years. He never asked for a house from anyone.”

“I know, but I love the Lord so much and I feel bad living in my beautiful palace, when God has just a tent. I have all these ideas ...”

“David, the house for God is a good idea, but you’re just not the one to do it. Here’s what God wants you to know. These are his words to you: ‘You and I have had a special relationship. I’ve guided you over the years, and you are a man after my own heart. But my work with you included wars and bloodshed, so I don’t want you to be the one to build my house. After you die, I’m going to have your son Solomon build the temple. He’s the one I’ve chosen for this job.’

“Wow! My son. Well, I’m glad the temple will be built. But it was just so important to me. It was one of my life goals.”

As Nathan left, David started thinking. *I have so many things to explain to Solomon. He has to do it right. He’s young and inexperienced. Will he pick the right people? I’ve got to help him.*

When David set his heart on something, he was determined. He couldn’t just walk away. *If I can’t build it, then I will prepare everything for it.* He bought the land for the site from Araunah, who offered to give it to him free. But David said, “No, I’ll pay full price. I can’t offer sacrifice to the Lord from that which costs me nothing.”

Because David’s heart was committed, he was driven by his passion. He made extensive preparations for building the temple. He talked to workmen and managers. He ordered resources from all over the world. *I want this house to stand out—not just here in Israel but around the world.* David chose the stonecutters who would make the huge stones for the walls. He provided iron to make the hinges for the doors and gathered so much bronze that no one could even weigh it. David also imported so many cedar logs from Lebanon that no

one could count them, either. He collected 3,750 tons of gold and 37,500 tons of silver.

While other men's hobbies were hunting, horses, or collecting enemy artifacts, David's only hobby was making sure everything was ready for Solomon to build God's house. He made architectural drawings for the porches, the buildings, the storerooms, the upper parts, the inner rooms, and the place of atonement. It was all there. David didn't miss a detail. He made diagrams for all the equipment and utensils that would go into the temple. The plans told the weight of the metal in each cup, plate, and candlestick. David prescribed how much gold to put on each piece of furniture.

Solomon watched his dad work. He could see the passion in his father. Day after day, his dad told him about the plans to build the Lord's temple. "Son, I had it in my heart to build the temple, but God wants you to build it instead. God says you will be a man of peace and rest. Our country sure needs that after all the fighting I've had to do. But, son, please don't think you can take this job lightly. It's so important. This is God's house. Please put your heart into it as I've done."

Then David called all the leaders of Israel together. "Officials of Israel, I've had it in my heart to build a house of God, but he wants my son to build it instead. I am now charging all of you before your fellow countrymen and before God to help Solomon. Do what he tells you to do.

"And Solomon, here are all the plans you will need to build this house for God. I hope I've thought of everything. Be strong and courageous, son, and do the work. You have all the raw materials you need and you have all the people you need. Son, all you need now is the heart. Will you please set your heart on building this house?"

That's all David could do. He had to let it go and let God do the rest through his son. David died soon after, but he'd

have been pleased. Solomon rose to the task. He built a magnificent temple. It took seven years, but it had all the beauty David had imagined. David's passion endured long after his death, and the goal he set was accomplished. Although he didn't see it happen, he got what his heart desired. Through his son, he built the house of God.

(This story is taken from 2 Samuel 7, 1 Chronicles 22 and 28, and 1 Kings 6-8.)

Chapter 1

What Is the Heart? (Part 1)



More than 750 verses in the Bible use the term *heart*. It's where longings grow, secrets are kept, pain is felt, plans are devised, commitments solidify, and character is developed. In short, the heart is a person's center, the deepest spot in one's life.

When you talk to yourself, you're doing work in your heart, sorting out issues, synchronizing them with other priorities and values, and preparing responses. Discouragement is felt in the heart, as well as anxiety, fear, and anger. Peace, joy, and love also produce their fruits in the heart.

Instead of working on the heart, many parents settle for simply changing their children's behavior. After all, you can see behavior and, most of the time, you can control it. The heart is a mysterious place over which you have little control. The work of understanding it, though, pays off well as you help your children make lasting changes. You experience greater closeness, and children develop maturity.

Before we can help you change your child's heart, you must first understand a little more about what it is, how it works, and what makes it tick. We want to help you understand how the Bible uses the word *heart* and then apply that

understanding to your relationship with your children. Hold on; there's a lot here. Don't get bogged down—just let yourself experience an overview of what God's Word teaches about the heart.



**THE HEART IS
WHERE WE FIGHT
INTERNAL
BATTLES AS WE
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SENSE OF LIFE.**

The Bible talks about nine different functions of the heart. We'll discuss five in this chapter and four in the next. You'll find this reading stimulating as you develop new ways to work on your child's deeper issues.

1. The Heart is a Wrestling Place

First and foremost, the heart is where we fight internal battles as we try to make sense of life.

For example, Jesus knew the teachers of the law were struggling inside with the fact that he forgave the paralytic. In Matthew 9:4 he said, "Why do you entertain evil thoughts in your hearts?" Mary was intrigued by all the events of Jesus' birth, and the Bible says in Luke 2:19 that she "pondered all these things in her heart." When the two disciples on the road to Emmaus realized their surprise guest was Jesus, they reflected on the experience by saying, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?"

When experience, teaching, and values need to be integrated into our lives, it happens in the workshop of our hearts. Information comes into our heads constantly, but much of it just stays there. Only what moves into our hearts becomes part of our lives.

When eight-year-old Jordan tells himself, "I'm no good. No one wants to be with me. I'll never get it right," he's filling his

heart with negative images of himself. Rebecca feels good in her heart because she refused to join those who were disrespectful to their teacher. Jack's mom can see a heart problem because he scowls and complains whenever she asks him to do something. In their hearts, children wrestle with and come to conclusions about life and its challenges.

This deeper part of a person's life is often a mystery, leaving parents confused about how to affect any significant change in their children. Recognizing that the heart is a wrestling place gives parents the motivation to relate to their children on a deeper level.

2. The Heart is the Place of Commitments and Determination

After the wrestling, children reach conclusions that turn into decisions and commitments. Jesus told the expert in the law that the greatest commandment is to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart" (Matt. 22:37). Paul encouraged the believers in Antioch to "remain true to the Lord with all their hearts" (Acts 11:23). Moses told the people, "Take to heart all the words I have solemnly declared to you this day.... They are your life" (Deut. 32:46–47). Proverbs 3:5 says, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart." Each of these verses is a call to commitment.

Commitments provide purpose, meaning, and direction. Without these, the heart lives in continual turmoil, tossed around by fear, anger, or anxiety. Often, a continual problem with negative emotions indicates the need for some major heart work. Children need to understand more about life and how to



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process it and even adopt new teaching into their value systems.

Five-year-old Jerry decided he was going to help in Sunday school. Each Sunday when he got to church, he marched right in and looked for ways to help the teacher. Dad could see he had a commitment to help, and it affected the boy's whole Sunday experience. Dad looked for ways to encourage Jerry's heart commitment. Ralph, age fourteen, was determined to save money for a remote-controlled car. Mom told us, "He set his heart on getting that car and spent hours earning the money." Martha was committed to her friends but not to her schoolwork, requiring some major heart shifts to get her commitments into proper balance.



**AS PARENTS,
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WAYS.**

Sometimes parents are encouraged by the commitments they see their children make, and other times red flags go up, warning parents to take action. Kids can become so focused on what they want that they get angry when they can't get it. Helping our children adjust and balance their commitments is part of the heart-work necessary to develop maturity in their lives.

3. The Heart Is Where We Feel Close to Others

In Acts 4:32, the early disciples "were one in heart and mind," a statement of their unity. Jonathan's armor bearer expressed unity to his boss by saying, "Do all that you have in mind.... I am with you heart and soul" (1 Sam. 14:7).

In the end times, God will restore closeness in family life. Malachi 4:6 says, "He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers."

On the other hand, people also can feel distant from others in their hearts. Michal, David's wife, didn't like how he was worshipping the Lord and "despised him in her heart" (2 Sam. 6:16).

As parents, we long to connect with our children in meaningful ways. When children are young, those special moments happen regularly, even daily. You read a book to your four-year-old every night, he leans on your arm, and you cherish those times of closeness. He's ready to believe everything you say. You play a card-matching game on the floor with your five-year-old, and she laughs and says, "You're fun to play with, Mommy." You correct your six-year-old, and he cries that repentant cry and wants a hug—and tears come to your eyes, too, because you know you've connected with his heart.

These special moments of heart connection also happen with older children, but, in many families, they come less often. A fourteen-year-old gets a positive school report, giving her dad an opportunity to affirm her hard work. Her smile confirms he made the heart connection he'd hoped for. A seventeen-year-old gets fired from his job and wants to talk about it. His mom listens for a while and can tell her son appreciates her acceptance. You take your teenage son and his friends to the beach and try extra hard to relate in ways that don't embarrass your son. At the end of the day, one of the kids says, "Your mom is cool," and your son gives you that look of approval. You know you connected at heart level. The closeness you and your children feel (or don't feel) is a heart function.

4. The Heart is Where We Experience Emotions

People usually recognize that the heart and emotions go together. In fact, some people see this aspect of the heart as the only one. They don't realize how many other parts of the

heart affect a child. Many families ignore emotions or view them as a nuisance. Emotions affect children more than they realize, and it's important to put them in proper perspective and plan to deal with them in family life.



**“DO NOT LET
YOUR HEARTS BE
TROUBLED, AND
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(JOHN 14:27).**

Jesus told his disciples, “Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid” (John 14:27). In Colossians 3:15, Paul wrote, “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts.” The Mosaic law says, “Do not hate your brother in your heart” (Lev. 19:17). The king saw Nehemiah was troubled and said, “this can be nothing but sadness of heart” (Neh. 2:2). Proverbs 17:22 says, “a cheerful heart is good medicine.”

Kyra, age six, struggled with fear. She was timid around others, hesitant to try new things, and afraid to go upstairs by herself. Mom had tried to coax her, sometimes gently and other times firmly, with little success. We began working with Kyra's heart. She had developed certain heart responses to life's challenges, believing she'd fail or get hurt in most circumstances. Together with her mom and dad, we explored her fears, taught her about trust and confidence, and then practiced some risk-taking activities. We taught her how to pray through her fears, and she memorized several Bible verses about trusting God and accomplishing things with his strength. Mom enrolled Kyra in a community soccer league, encouraged her to pay for something at the store, and sent her on “missions” to stretch her courage.

At the same time, Mom and Dad were careful to avoid pushing their daughter too far, condemning, or communicating undue frustration with what they perceived to be slow

progress. After several months, improvement was obvious. Kyra was changing on a heart level, causing outward adjustments as well.

Joel's dog, Skippy, died. Joel, age thirteen, had raised that dog from a puppy. They had played together, slept together, and Joel had taken care of him when he was sick. Now his beloved friend was gone. His heart was broken; the pain was intense. He spent the next few days bouncing between lashing out at those around him to sitting quietly and introspectively. His heart was working hard to absorb this unwanted new experience: life without his friend.

Mom was patient with Joel, giving him space to grieve and work things out. She initiated conversation with him often and looked for ways to comfort him. Sometimes Joel used his sadness as an excuse for being unkind or disrespectful, but Mom made it clear that grieving was okay and meanness was not. Over time, Joel adjusted to life without Skippy. Mom's approach was successful because she considered Joel's heart during that time.

5. The Heart is Where Temptations and Desires Develop

With commitments, determinations, and emotions all converging in the heart, it's no wonder temptation germinates there.

Matthew 6:21 says, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Psalm 37:4 says, "Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart." Solomon's "wives turned his heart after other gods" (1 Kings 11:4). Paul wrote, "My heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved" (Rom. 10:1).

Clearly, desires aren't always bad; in fact, many human longings are good. Knowing the difference, however, can be a

challenge at times. Of course, we all wish our children would desire the right things and avoid tempting situations. One mom saw her eight-year-old daughter was easily swayed by her friends. She looked for ways to help her daughter take a stand for righteousness. She talked with her daughter about what was right and wrong in various situations and helped her see what temptation is and how she was making some dangerous choices by giving in to her friends. The girl responded well to her mother and began to look for ways to stand for what's right.

A twelve-year-old asked his mom why she doesn't get angry when she gets cut off on the road, giving Mom a perfect opportunity to talk about how she let it go so she doesn't have to harbor the anger. She knew he needed that message, because he'd been treated unfairly at school and was tempted to act out his own anger. He listened and pondered what she said. Mom watched the wheels turn in his head and knew she had just connected somewhere deep inside her son.



You've read about just five functions of the heart, but we hope you're already seeing yourself and your child on these pages. To command a child to "Stop having a bad attitude" may draw attention to the child's problem, but it doesn't usually address the heart issues the attitude represents. Excusing a child's disrespect by saying, "At least he does what I tell him to do" focuses on behavior and misses an opportunity to do some deeper work.

It's important to discipline children for wrong behavior,

but that's not enough. Children often need help processing much of what they're wrestling with on the inside. Their feelings may dominate their decisions. They may long for closeness but not know how to get it. God has placed parents in a position in their children's lives to help this process.

Sometimes a well-meaning Christian will say something like, "I don't think it's possible to work on the heart. That's God's job. Children who haven't yet committed their lives to Christ can't change their hearts, so asking parents to do so is just a waste of time." Although it's true that supreme heart change takes place through the gift of salvation, God has given parents the responsibility to till the soil and teach their children how to respond to God's continual work of grace in their lives. The Bible uses the term *repentance* to describe the personal responsibility we all have to change our hearts. God expects people to respond to him, and he calls them to repentance regularly in his Word. Parents are in a God-given role of teaching their children every day what it means to respond to God. When you understand your potential as a dad or mom in your child's life, you can understand the huge spiritual opportunity and responsibility God has given you.

The more you focus on your child's heart and consider a heart-based approach to child-training, the more ideas and solutions you'll discover. You might even want to take time to read each of the passages mentioned in this chapter and imagine yourself in the particular situation. See how God



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addresses the heart of those he works with and how significant change takes place.

Both from personal experience and from thousands of families we've worked with, we find that parents must change first before their children will change. How you work with your children makes all the difference between progress and hitting a brick wall. We've watched parents make significant adjustments in the ways they parent—with amazing results. As you consider the heart's functions, try to look at specific ways you're presently working with your children. We'll give you several more pointers in the chapters ahead.

Prayer

Thank you for the things I can learn from my children. Sometimes, Lord, my heart issues get in the way of my parenting. Please give me insight into my own life and make me a clean vessel for your use. I look forward to what you're going to do in my children's lives. Please give me hope through even small glimpses into their hearts. Amen.

Chapter 2

What Is the Heart? (Part 2)



God created the heart to be a person's central processing unit. When working correctly, the heart enables children to mature and respond to life in productive ways.

Notice how the next four heart functions contribute to a child's independence. Parents often wish their children would have the maturity to deal with life with less parental involvement. If the heart is in the right place, God uses it as a guide to keep a person on track and moving in the right direction.

6. The Heart Experiences Guilt and Conviction of Sin

When Peter preached on Pentecost, "people were cut to the heart" (Acts 2:37). When David cut off part of Saul's robe in the cave, 1 Samuel 24:5 (KJV) says his "heart smote him." David experienced conviction again when he counted the fighting men (2 Sam. 24:10). In Psalm 51, after he sinned with Bathsheba, David prayed to God, "Create in me a pure heart" (v. 10) and cried, "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart" (v. 17).

The Holy Spirit convicts the hearts of people. Guilt's purpose is to point out sin in our lives and motivate us to deal



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with it. Sometimes you can just look at a child and see that he's guilty. He knows it. He can feel it. Guilt affects kids' hearts and robs them of peace.

A good correction routine gives children a chance to gain a clean slate by admitting wrong and asking forgiveness. Often, those steps do the necessary work of cleaning up the heart. After all, God says in 1 John 1:9, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."

Six-year-old Peter told his mom, "I have to tell you something. Last week I broke the glass ornament off your dresser; then I hid it in my room. Here it is. I'm sorry." Peter's mom valued the ornament but loved her son even more. "Your heart was bothering you all week, wasn't it? You did the right thing by coming and telling me about it. I'll miss my ornament, but your heart is more important than anything like this. I'm glad you decided to make it right. Come here and give me a hug. I forgive you."

Guilt is experienced in the heart, motivating children to cover it up, blame others, or justify it—or confess and make things right. As you help your children process their offenses, you can do some significant heart work. A clear and strong conscience becomes a valuable ally as children maneuver through life's challenges.

7. The Heart Experiences Passion

Hezekiah was a good king who served the Lord with all his heart (2 Chron. 31:21). David said in the psalms, "I will praise you, O LORD, with all my heart" (9:1) and "I seek you with all

my heart." (119:10). In each of these verses, the word *heart* communicates the idea of passion.

When people do something wholeheartedly, they're doing it with zest and determination. Sometimes we say he put his heart into a job, or she has a heart for what she's doing.

Juan loved to play with his new video game. Every spare moment, he tried to get to the next level and improve his skills and techniques. Mom felt Juan was overdoing it a bit, so she established video-game time limits and looked for more constructive outlets for Juan's passion in life. Because Juan is a determined and passionate person, she knew part of her job was to continually direct him into more appropriate activities.

Some children have a tendency toward intensity in their lives. They seem to do everything with passion. This may be okay when they're achieving their goals, but when other people get in their way and they react with unkindness, their passion creates a problem. Part of growing up is knowing when to invest emotionally in something, what to get passionate about. When you help children in this area, you're contributing to an important aspect of their hearts.



**PART OF GROWING UP
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8. The Heart Chooses Values to Hold and Convictions to Live By

All parents long for their children to establish convictions that will carry them through tough times. Sometimes those convictions help them control their own emotions. Other



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times, that internal foundation helps them do what's right when others are tempting them to do wrong. Responsibility, in part, is staying true to personal values even when no one is watching. It's been said you can tell a lot about who a person really is by what he does in private, not just how he acts in front of others. Convictions become the moral pillars in our lives that keep us on track.

Moses told the people to put the commands of God "on your hearts" (Deut. 6:6). When David described the righteous person in Psalm 37:31, he wrote, "The law of his God is in his heart; his feet do not slip." "Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king's meat" (Dan. 1:8 KJV). When Jeremiah described the new covenant God will establish, he wrote that it will be different from the stone tablets of the old covenant. God said, "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts" (Jer. 31:33).

Jack decided he wouldn't watch a certain TV show at his friend's house because he knew his parents wouldn't approve. Marlene believed that killing animals is wrong, so she told her mom she wanted to become a vegetarian. Marvin chose to turn in the watch he found at school because he knew keeping it would be wrong. These kids wanted to hold true to something they believed in. Those convictions determined the choices they made.

Some children do a better job of developing convictions than others, but all need guidance in this area. When should you stand up for yourself and when should you be a servant?

What does honesty look like in tough situations? How do you balance telling the truth and being gracious?

Your children likely have convictions already. Do you know what they are? What convictions are you trying to pass on? Do you have a plan for teaching them? These are heart issues and become the schoolhouse for the family.

9. The Heart Is Where We Connect with God

Romans 10:9–10 says a key to salvation is when you “believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead.” Paul asked God to strengthen the Ephesians with power “so that Christ may dwell in your hearts” (Eph. 3:17). Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 1:22 that God has put his Spirit “in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.” In Jeremiah 24:7, the prophet wrote that God will give the people a heart to know him, that he is the Lord. Jesus said, “These people honor me with their lips but their hearts are far from me” (Matt. 15:8) about people who didn’t know God personally.

It’s in the heart where we get to know God in a personal way. He’s chosen to live in our hearts—the central place in our lives—and when he does, he sets things in order. He organizes our priorities, rearranges our values, and reveals sin that must be addressed. Parents often become the hands and feet God uses to mold a child’s heart. Our job is to find out where God is working, and then partner with him to do the deeper work necessary in our kids’ lives.



**IT’S IN THE
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KNOW GOD IN A
PERSONAL WAY.**

This is a Little Deep for Me

Proverbs 20:5 says that “the purposes of a man’s heart are

deep waters.” The implication is that the heart is a hard place to get to at times, complicated to understand, and difficult to adjust.

Extra time and energy are required to make heart connections with our kids. Some parents find this approach daunting. “What do I do about my day-to-day problems? How do I handle the misbehavior I see now? Changing the heart sounds great, but I have to make sure he gets his homework done tonight.”

It’s true that sometimes we have to just get through the day. But once you have a heart-based approach, your problem-solving strategies change.

With your new outlook, even day-to-day discipline has a long-range view. Sure, it takes time, but the alternative is scary. Focusing only on behavior often allows children to develop deep heart problems that eventually manifest themselves in tragic ways.

Many parents are lured into believing that if the to-do list items are checked off, it was a successful day. Unfortunately, if the heart issues aren’t addressed, then eventually they create bigger problems than you ever imagined. Teenage rebellion doesn’t start at age thirteen; it starts much earlier, in a young child’s heart. Sometimes parents are shocked when their teenagers get involved with drugs or sex or get in trouble with the law. But heart issues rarely appear suddenly; they grow over time. Parents who discipline from a heart perspective learn to see and address deeper issues before they turn into bigger problems.



**ONCE YOU HAVE A
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STRATEGIES CHANGE.**

The Biggest Asset for Heart Change

God is in the business of changing hearts. Religion often focuses on behavior—doing certain things that might please God. But the Bible teaches something very different: salvation is a relationship with God that does a deep work, changing the configuration of one's heart. As a result, our desires change and our will determines to do different things. Naturally, the resulting behavior falls in line with what God is doing in the heart. In this way, people are transformed from the inside out.

The best decision your child can make is to allow God to do the consecrating work of salvation in his or her life. We often use the words “Ask Jesus to come into your heart” because they describe how deeply people's lives change when they become Christians. Their longings and desires change. Their strategies and plans focus on a different goal. Peace replaces guilt, anger, and fear.

But even the most consecrated person struggles with sin. It's a heart issue. Some children just naturally have open hearts, and they learn quickly, repent often, and change on a deeper level. Then there are the other 99 percent of children who need parental initiative to help create those teachable moments and build the inner fortitude needed to follow the Lord in every area of their lives.

A spiritual battle is raging for our children's hearts. In today's world, parents can't be complacent and just hope everything will turn out okay. When Jesus prayed in the



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Garden of Gethsemane, he did serious business with the Father, praying intensely for the upcoming challenges. Jesus asked Peter, James, and John to pray also, but they fell asleep instead. They had no idea of the spiritual challenge Jesus was facing and the danger they were all in as a result. When Jesus took a break from praying and found them sleeping, he said, "Watch and pray." Unfortunately, they fell back asleep, unaware of the increasing danger. A short time later, the guards came into the garden to arrest Jesus. Peter jumped up and started swinging a sword, contributing to the problem and creating another mess for Jesus to clean up.



**JESUS' WORDS,
"WATCH AND PRAY,"
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IMPORTANT PRINCIPLE
FOR PARENTS.**

Today, some parents are like Peter. They aren't ready for the challenges of parenting, and they just start swinging swords or attacking kids instead of working with the Lord to solve the problems.

Over and over again, as you read this book, you'll see that spiritual nourishment is a major source of heart development. Don't run over those paragraphs too quickly. Do you have spiritual resources to share with your children? God wants to give them to you.

In fact, the greatest parenting tip we could share with you is this: Maintain a strong connection to your heavenly Father. He offers spiritual guidance and direction to help you work through your own heart issues so you can be more effective with your children.

Jesus' words, "Watch and pray," are also an important principle for parents. Start watching your child's heart.

Become more aware of the deeper problems. Ask God to show you the real issues your son or daughter is facing. Then pray. Spend time talking to the Lord about your child's heart issues. Becoming more aware and seeking God's guidance are the first steps to successfully addressing the heart.

Now that you've explored what the heart is, you may feel a bit overwhelmed. In the coming chapters, we'll help you make more sense of these rather complex concepts. But first, we wanted you to get a glimpse of the depth of the heart. When you see how many facets it has, we pray you'll be motivated to see beyond your children's behavior and into their hearts.

Prayer

Lord, I pray the same prayer David prayed in Psalm 139:23: "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts." Please point out areas in my heart that are getting in the way of my effectiveness with my family. I want to serve you here at home, and I ask you to prepare me every day for the difficult work of parenting. I also ask you to make me sensitive to my children's heart needs. Help me to see past the mundane tasks of the day to the deeper issues in their lives. Please use me as an instrument in the work you're doing in their hearts. Amen.

Chapter 3

Will I or Won't I?



The heart is the deepest part of one's life. Once issues are addressed on this foundational level, we move to another platform: the will. The heart makes commitments; the will makes choices based on those commitments.

In Exodus 35, God had given instructions about building a tabernacle and the people were to donate the materials needed for the job. Verse 29 (KJV) says, "The children of Israel brought a willing offering unto the LORD, every man and woman, whose heart made them willing to bring for all manner of work, which the LORD had commanded to be made by the hand of Moses." Notice in that verse how the heart affects the will.

In Deuteronomy 30, when Moses spoke to the people about their commitment to the Lord, he used the word *heart* eight times. Then, in verse 19, he called them to make a choice: "I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live." Once a commitment is made in the heart, the will chooses to do the right thing.

The will is that place of determination. The level of one's determination is affected by such things as personality,



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character, values, and one's sense of morality. Parents and children often experience conflict when their wills determine to go in opposite directions. A wise parent helps turn potential fights around, looks for ways to redirect a child's intensity, and knows when taking a stand against a child's will is the most loving thing to do.

Strong-Willed Kids

Children who make decisions with intensity tend to be called "strong willed." At the end of the day, their parents feel as if they've been engaged in hand-to-hand combat for hours—and the children often win! All children fall somewhere on the continuum between strong willed and unmotivated, depending on their intensity level about life. Strong-willed kids are generally determined, highly motivated, persistent, and not easily persuaded once they've made up their minds. Most parents consider a strong will a negative personality trait because it often creates resistance and frustration in family life.

Four-year-old Michael wouldn't stay in bed. Mom had to send him back to bed several times each night. She said to us, "This is torture. Even if I yell and get angry, it doesn't seem to faze him. Nothing I do works. It's not fair. I work with him all day. I ought to get a little relief in the evening before I go to bed myself."