

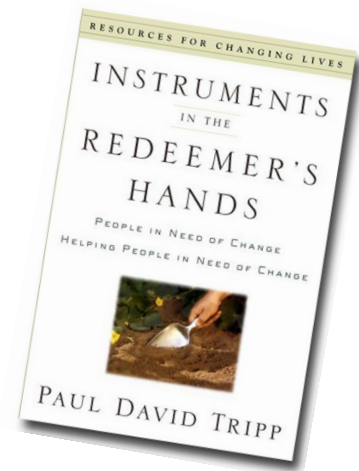
The following pages represent select chapters from two very helpful books on biblical counseling. They are not required reading for you as the advocate, but we believe they will be deeply beneficial.

In part, these chapters will give the advocate insight into the dynamics and goals of what we are doing at Twelve Stones as we try to care for the most hurting among us.

We also hope these pages will increase your ability to minister deeply to your beloved friends as you walk alongside them in this difficult season.

Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands

The following is an excerpt from the book by Paul David Tripp, (Chapter 4). Paul Tripp has served as an advisor to Twelve Stones Ministries for 5 years and presents a very like-minded philosophy of the mission and target of biblical counseling. We would highly recommend that you purchase the book in its entirety and believe it would be a great encouragement to you as you walk-alongside your friend.
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Chapter 4: THE HEART IS THE TARGET

I grew up in Toledo, Ohio, and our family usually went east for our vacations. But when I was sixteen years old, my dad decided to take our family on the Great Trip West. That year, Dad loaded my mother, my brother Mark, and me into a Ford Falcon and we headed out. For Dad, everything else we did was but a prelude to this experience.

As background, I should note that Dad approached vacations as a contract between the family and himself. His part of the bargain was to plan and finance the trip. Our part was to have a good time. Thus whenever he would ask us if we were having fun, the prudent answer was a hearty “yes.” Otherwise, he would launch into a well-rehearsed speech about how much money he was spending and how much time he had invested in planning our trip. He would conclude by saying that if he had known we were not going to have fun, we would have stayed home where we could do it for free!

Finally, the “Day of the Grand Canyon” came. Dad had never been more excited—an emotion that was obviously not shared by my mother. He awakened us early and we soon were on our way. When we reached the Grand Canyon, Dad refused to see it at a location that was “all fences and tourist traps.” He began to explore, and we ended up driving down a dirt road and then over open ground until we parked 200 feet from the rim.

Mark and I immediately ran for the edge. We pretended to push each other over the rim and sat dangling our feet over the mile-high wall of rock. We threw stone after stone over the edge, oblivious to anyone who might have been hiking and camping below us. It was amazing to witness stones silently disappearing without ever hearing or seeing them hit. We were having a blast, totally unencumbered by fear.

Meanwhile, Mom hadn’t even gotten out of the car. She had one foot on the ground, tapping to make sure that the turf was solid. She had visions that the rim would crumble and we would all fall to the bottom of the Canyon with the car on top of us.

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My dad knew she was struggling so he had placed himself near the car. But then Mom would say, “Bob, the boys, the boys!” and Dad would run toward us to make sure we were okay. At that point, Mom would get queasy and call him back. In short, I don’t think my dad saw much of the canyon that day; he was too busy running back and forth, ensuring that everyone was having fun according to the plan. All of us were in the very same place at the very same moment, interacting with the very same natural phenomenon, but each of us was having a very different experience.

I tell this story because it gets to the heart of what personal ministry is about. Effective personal ministry takes the Kingdom promise of lasting change to the place where it is needed—the heart. In my vacation story, the heart of each member of our family was revealed in our behavior that day. Why did each of us experience such a different day when we were in the same location at the same time? Why did each of us act so differently? The answer goes back to our hearts.

My dad’s heart was filled with a desire for his family to have a great time. Everything he said and did was controlled by that desire. Mom’s heart was gripped by a powerful fear of heights and her concern for her sons, and this was reflected in her words and actions. Mark and I approached the scene with the fearlessness, invincibility, and immaturity of teenage boys. We just wanted to have fun. Each of us brought a different heart to the situation and so our experiences and actions differed. Our hearts directed our behavior.

WHY DO PEOPLE DO THE THINGS THEY DO?

If you want to be part of what God is doing in the lives of others, you need to understand how God designed human beings to function. Why do people do the things they do?

Why can your toddler be so contrary? Why did your friend get upset in the middle of the conversation? Why is your teenager so angry? Why is Amy swallowed up by depression and despair? Why would a man risk his family for twenty minutes of sexual pleasure? Why do you get angry in traffic? Why is that once-romantic couple now engaged in guerilla warfare? Why is Bill driven in his career? Why is Sue so critical and controlling? Why does George speak so bluntly and unkindly? Why is your daughter afraid of what her friends will think? Why does Pete refuse to talk? Why do people do the things they do? The simplest, most biblical answer is the heart.

Even though the heart is one of the Bible’s most dominant themes, there is much confusion about the term. In western culture the term is relegated to the fields of romance (Valentine’s Day) and sports (“he plays with a lot of heart”). In the Bible, however, the heart is an essential category. You cannot understand the human being without understanding the heart. So, what does this term describe?

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The Bible uses “heart” to describe the inner person. Scripture divides the human being into two parts, the inner and outer being. The outer person is your physical self; the inner person is your spiritual self (Eph. 3:16). The synonym the Bible most often uses for the inner being is the heart. It encompasses all the other terms and functions used to describe the inner person (spirit, soul, mind, emotions, will, etc.). These other terms do not describe something different from the heart. Rather, they are aspects of it, parts or functions of the inner person.

The heart is the “real” you. It is the essential core of who you are. Though we put a tremendous amount of emphasis on the outer person, we all recognize that the true person is the person within. For example, when you say that you are getting to know someone, you are not saying that you have a deeper knowledge of his ears or nose! You are talking about the inner person, the heart. You know how the person thinks, what he wants, what makes him happy or sad. You can predict what he is feeling at any given moment. Because the Bible says your heart is the essential you, any ministry of change must target the heart. This perspective is explained in several Scripture passages.

FRUIT, ROOTS, AND THE HEART

One of the most important word pictures in the New Testament reveals Christ’s perspective on how people function. It is Christ’s answer to the age-old question, “Why do people do the things they do?”

No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. Each tree is recognized by its own fruit. People do not pick figs from thorn bushes, or grapes from briars. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks. (Luke 6:43-45)

Christ used ordinary physical things to explain unfamiliar truths. Here he likens the way people function to a tree. If you plant apple seeds and they take root, you don’t expect to see peaches or oranges growing. You expect apple seeds to become apple trees that produce apples. There is an organic relationship between the roots of the plant and the fruit it produces. Christ is saying that the same is true with people. In Christ’s metaphor, fruit equals behavior. The particular fruit (behavior) this passage discusses is our words. Christ says that our words are literally our heart overflowing. People and situations don’t make us say what we say, though we tend to blame them. (“He made me so angry!” “If you had been there, you would have said the same thing!”)

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“These kids simply make me insane!”) Rather, this passage says that our words are controlled by our hearts. A tree produces fruit, and our hearts produce behavior. We recognize a tree by the fruit it produces, and, in the same way, the Bible says people are known by their fruit.

In my early pastoral days we lived in a twin home, with our elderly landlady living in the other side of the house. In exchange for reduced rent, I agreed to do all of the yard work. In the busyness of ministry and family life, it was sometimes hard to find time to mow, rake, or shovel, but I tried to be prompt and faithful. However, no matter how disciplined I tried to be, my work never seemed timely enough for our landlady. To get me to work on her schedule, she would go out and start shoveling or raking, knowing full well that I would rush out and complete the job. I was unaware of how irritated I have become over her manipulation until one afternoon when I heard the leaves rustling outside. I looked out the window to see my landlady, in her housedress and slippers, raking the leaves. In my anger, with my hands on my hips, I said aloud, “If she think I’m going to rush out there and rake for her, she’s nuts! I’m going to rake on my time or not at all!”

What I didn’t realize was that one of my sons had been standing beside me. In a split second, to my horror, I saw him in the front yard, hands on *his* hips, yelling at my landlady, “My dad says if you think he is going to rush out here and rake for you, you’re nuts!” I couldn’t believe it. I was mortified. I wanted to back away from my words and rush out to tell my landlady that I had said no such thing—or at least that my son had misunderstood what I’d said. But I had to face the fact that the words *had* come out of me, that I *had* said what I’d meant, and that the words were the fruit of anger I had carried for quite a while. There was an organic connection between my words and my heart. You would not solve my heart problem by removing my son or teaching me to be more judicious with my words (though you would save me a lot of embarrassment!). The problem with my words was directly tied to the problem with my heart, which is where a comprehensive solution needed to be applied. This leads us to the second half of Christ’s illustration.

In Christ’s example, the roots of the tree equal the heart. They are underground and therefore not as easily seen or understood. But Jesus’ point is that a tree has the kind of fruit it does because of the kind of roots it has: we speak and act the way we do because of what is in our hearts.

There may be no more important thing to say about how people function, yet this seems to be hard for us to accept. In many ways we deny this connection and blame people and circumstances for our actions and words. Here Christ calls us to humbly accept responsibility for our behavior. He calls us to humbly admit that relationships and circumstances are only the occasions in which our hearts reveal themselves.

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If my heart is the source of my sin problem, then lasting change must always travel through the pathway of my heart. It is not enough to alter my behavior or to change my circumstances. Christ transforms people by radically changing their hearts. If the heart doesn't change, the person's words and behavior may change temporarily because of an external pressure or incentive. But when the pressure or incentive is removed, the changes will disappear.

This is the spiritual truth Christ accused the Pharisees of missing in Matthew 23:25-26: "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside will also be clean."

Christ looked at the externalism of the Pharisees and said, "You guys just don't get it. You pride yourselves on your right behavior, yet your hearts are a mess! Start with your hearts and right behavior will follow." To make his point, Christ pushes his illustration to the limit. He says, "Clean the inside of the dish and the outside will also be clean." You can't really do this with your dishes at home—washing the inside of a dirty pan will not automatically clean the outside. Yet this is what Christ is advising; that's how powerful the heart is. Do we really believe what Christ is teaching here?

Many of our attempts to change behavior ignore the heart behind the actions. We threaten ("You don't want to even think about what I will do if you do that again!"), we manipulate ("Would you like a car of your own? All you have to do is..."), instill guilt ("I do and do for you and this is the thanks I get?"), raise our voices, and do a host of other things to change behavior, but change never lasts. The moment the outside pressure wanes, the behavior reverts to what it was before. The body always goes where the heart leads.

PERSONAL MINISTRY AND FRUIT STAPLING

Christ's word picture helps set the direction for personal ministry, as we can see when we expand and apply it. Let's say I have an apple tree in my backyard.¹ Each year its apples are dry, wrinkled, brown, and pulpy. After several seasons my wife says, "It doesn't make any sense to have this huge tree and never be able to eat any apples. Can't you do something?" One day my wife looks out the window to see me in the yard, carrying branch cutters, an industrial grade staple gun, a ladder, and two bushels of apples.

I climb the ladder, cut off all the pulpy apples, and staple shiny, red apples onto every branch of the tree. From a distance our tree looks like it is full of a beautiful harvest. But if you were my wife, what would you be thinking of me at this moment?

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If a tree produces bad apples year after year, there is something drastically wrong with its system, down to its very roots. I won't solve the problem by stapling new apples onto the branches. They also will rot because they are not attached to a life-giving root system. And next spring, I will have the same problem again. I will not see a new crop of healthy apples because my solution has not gone to the heart of the problem. If the tree's roots remain unchanged, it will never produce good apples.

The point is that, in personal ministry, much of what we do to produce growth and change in ourselves and others is little more than "fruit stapling." It attempts to exchange apples for apples without examining the heart, the root behind the behavior. This is the very thing for which Christ criticized the Pharisees. Change that ignores the heart will seldom transform the life. For a while, it may seem like the real thing, but it will prove temporary and cosmetic.

This often happens in personal ministry. From a distance it looks as if the person has really changed. When held accountable, the person does and says different things. The husband seems to be gentle and attentive to his wife. The teenager seems to treat his parents with new respect. The depressed person is up and out of the house. The broken relationship seems to have been restored. But the changes don't last and in six weeks or six months, the person is right back where he started. Why? Because the change did not penetrate the heart, so changes in behavior were doomed to be temporary.

This is what happens to the teenager who goes through the teen years fairly well under the careful love, instruction, and oversight of Christian parents, only to go off to college and completely forsake his faith. I would suggest that in most cases he has not forsaken his faith. In reality, his faith was the faith of his parents; he simply lived within its limits while he was still at home. When he went away to school and those restraints were removed, his true heart was revealed. He had not internalized the faith. He had not entrusted himself to Christ in a life-transforming way. He did the "Christian" things he was required to do at home, but his actions did not flow from a heart of worship. In the college culture, he had nothing to anchor him, and the true thoughts and motives of his heart led him away from God. College was not the cause of his problem. It was simply the place where his true heart was revealed. The real problem was that faith never took root in his heart. As a result, his words, choices, and actions did not reveal a heart for God. Good behavior lasted for a while, but it proved to be temporary because it was not rooted in the heart.

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Christ's illustration establishes three principles that guide our efforts to serve as God's instruments of change in the lives of others.

1. There is an undeniable root and fruit connection between our heart and our behavior. People and situations do not determine our behavior; they provide the occasion where our behavior reveals our hearts.
2. Lasting change always takes place through the pathway of the heart. Fruit change is the result of root change. Similarly, in Matthew 23, Christ says, "Clean the inside of the cup and dish and the outside will become clean." Any agenda for change must focus on the thoughts and desires of the heart.
3. Therefore, the heart is our target in personal growth and ministry. Our prayer is that God will work heart change in us and use us to produce heart change in others that results in new words, choices, and actions.

THE HEART OF THE MATTER

Though the Bible has much to say about the heart, few Christian books on marriage and family, communication, conflict resolution, or even discipleship focus on it. These practical books seldom display an understanding of the centrality of the heart and how it operates. We can't assume that people understand us when we talk about these things. We need to develop the ideas further.

An interesting Old Testament passage can help us do this.

Some of the elders of Israel came to me and sat down in front of me. Then the word of the LORD came to me: "Son of man, these men have set up idols in their hearts and put wicked stumbling blocks before their faces. Should I let them inquire of me at all? Therefore speak to them and tell them, 'This is what the sovereign LORD says: When any Israelite sets up idols in his heart and puts a wicked stumbling block before his face and then goes to a prophet, I the LORD will answer him myself in keeping with his great idolatry. I will do this to recapture the hearts of the people of Israel, who have all deserted me for their idols.'" (Ezek. 14:1-5)

The elders of Israel have come to the prophet Ezekiel with questions they want to ask God. It would seem like these spiritual leaders are doing the right thing. But God recognizes that there is something wrong with them. What is it?

God points out their idolatry, which is idolatry of a specific kind. They have idols *in their hearts*, a more personal and fundamental form of idolatry than ritual religious or cultural idolatry. An idol of the heart is *anything that rules me other than God*.

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As worshiping beings, human beings always worship someone or something. This is not a situation where some people worship and some don't. If God isn't ruling my heart someone or something else will. It is the way we were made.

Romans 1 is helpful here. It is probably Scripture's best analysis of the nature and effects of sin. Paul presents the core of our struggle as a "great exchange."

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.

Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served *created things* rather than the *Creator*—who is forever praised. Amen. (Rom. 1:21-25)

Sin is fundamentally idolatrous. I do wrong things because my heart desires something more than the Lord. Sin produces a propensity toward idolatry in us all. We all migrate away from worship and service of the Creator toward worship and service of the created thing. This is the great spiritual war beneath every battle of behavior—the war for control of the heart. This struggle is captured will by the old hymn, *Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing*. The third verse says,

O to grace how great a debtor daily I'm constrained to be; let that grace now, like a fetter, bind my wandering heart to thee. Prone to wander—Lord, I feel it—prone to leave the God I love: here's my heart, O take and seal it, seal it for thy courts above.

The hymn reflects the fact that a person does not wake up one morning and say, "You know, I'm tired of being a theist. I think I'll become an atheist." No, the hymn depicts the great exchange that takes place within our hearts in the routine moments of life. Sin leads us to believe that life can be found away from the Creator, and so we, in subtle and obvious ways, forget the Creator and defy the creation. Our behavior is ruled, not by worship and service of the Lord, but by a ravenous desire for something in the creation. As John Calvin said, our hearts are "idol factories," and our words and actions are shaped by our pursuit of the things our hearts crave.

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To make matters worse, this idolatry is hidden. It is deceptive; it exists underground. We can make this great exchange without forsaking our confessional theology or even our observance of the external duties of the faith. So we hold onto our beliefs, tithe, remain faithful in church attendance, and occasionally participate in ministry activity. Yet at the level of what we are really living for, we have forsaken God for something else. This is the silent cancer that weakens the church, robs individuals of their spiritual vitality, and leads to all kinds of difficulty in relationships and situations.

At its core, sin is moral thievery. It steals the worship that rightly belongs to God and gives it to someone or something else. It robs the Trinity to purchase the creation. Every sinner is in some way a worship thief.

At its center, sin is also spiritual adultery. It takes the love that belongs to God alone and gives it to someone or something else. It is a life shaped by the satisfaction of cravings, rather than by heartfelt commitment and faithfulness. Every sinner is in some way a spiritual adulterer.

The deepest issues of life are issues of worship. Worship is more fundamental to our essential nature than the pain, pressures, or pleasures of our experiences. What we worship determines our responses to all our experiences. Sin is much more than doing the wrong thing. It begins with loving, worshiping, and serving the wrong things. Sin in some way always involves the great exchange.

GOD'S RESPONSE

The Ezekiel passage then gives God's response to the elders. Because these men have idols in their hearts, God says he is going to answer them "in keeping with their great idolatry." What does this mean? God is saying, "Because you have idols in your hearts, the only thing I want to talk about is your idolatry." Why? Maybe these men had important things to ask God. Maybe they had pressing decisions to make. Why would God refuse to talk to them about anything but the idols?

A crucial phrase explains God's response and reveals much about how the heart functions: "These men have set up idols in their hearts and *put wicked stumbling blocks before their faces*" (Ezek. 14:3).

Imagine that someone places his hand up to his face so that he is looking through his fingers. What will happen to his vision? It will be seriously obstructed, and the only way to clear it is to remove his hand. In a similar way, an idol in the heart creates a stumbling block before the face. Until the idol is removed, it will distort and obscure everything else in the person's life. This is the principle of *inescapable influence*: *Whatever rules the heart will exercise inescapable influence over the person's life and behavior*. This principle has obvious implications for personal growth and ministry.

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I once counseled a successful executive from New York City. He was the most controlling man I have ever met. He had been married for thirty years and handled all of the financial, parenting, and decorating decisions of the family. He was so obsessed with control that he would rearrange his wife's clothes closet according to his prescribed plan (blouses, skirts, pants, and dresses, in graduated shades of color)! Now, imagine that I did not know all this as I spoke to his wife. His controlling tendencies would not be in my mind as I listened to her complain that she and her husband never talk and that many conflicts are left unsolved. What would happen if I rolled up my counselor's sleeves and gave the husband good biblical instruction on communication and conflict resolution? Would this lead to basic changes in his marriage? The answer is no, because he would use his new understanding and skills to get what his heart worshiped. Because my counsel would not have addressed this man's idols of the heart, it would only produce a more successful controller. As long as the desire for dominance ruled his heart, he would use whatever principles and skills he learned to establish even greater control over his family.

If we fail to examine the heart and the areas where it needs to change, our ministry efforts will only result in people who are more committed and successful idolaters. This is why God will only answer the elders of Israel in keeping with their heart idolatry. If they do not change there, whatever God tells them will only be used to serve the idols that rule their hearts. We will even use the principles of the Word to serve our idols!

Because idolatry operates in the subtle shadows of the thoughts and motives of our hearts, most committed idolaters have no idea that this is their problem. But the influence is powerful just the same.

COVERT AND OVERT IDOLATRY

I have traveled to northern India several times. Spiritually, this is one of the darkest places on earth. Idolatry permeates every aspect of individual and cultural life. Stand almost anywhere in northern India and you can see an altar to one of Hinduism's many gods. One day I stood in a temple and watched a young priest feed, bathe, and clothe an idol. I watched his colleague lie prostrate on the floor before an image of wood and gold. I was overcome by their sincerity and devotion. These inanimate images controlled every waking moment of the priests' young lives, even though they had no ability to see, speak, or act in any way beneficial to their worshipers. I witnessed hordes of poverty-stricken pilgrims bathing in the Ganges River after long, arduous journeys, so that their souls would be cleansed and their prayers answered.

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One day I entered a temple and watched person after person do homage to a fifteen-foot, black stone phallus. I thought to myself, *How blind and deceived these people must be! How utterly disgusting this must be in the eyes of the true and living God!* I literally ran out of the temple, overcome with the darkness, saying to myself, *I am glad I'm not like these people!* But as I looked back at the temple, I was humbled by the thought that I am like them. My idols are not the overt idols of Hindu polytheism; they are the covert idols of my heart. But either way, they are god-replacements. From God's vantage point, my idols are just as disgusting as anything I had seen that day. They command my daily devotion, shape my daily routine, and guide the way I interact with life, though they have no power whatsoever to deliver. There are times when I am just as deceived and blind as the young priests I observed. Overt idolatry has much to tell us about how covert idolatry controls our lives.

Nowhere but in Scripture will you get this perspective on human motivation. The Bible alone declares that human beings are worshipers by their very nature and that everything we say and do is shaped by worship. God's Word alone insists that we are always serving God or some aspect of the creation, and *whatever rules our hearts will exercise inescapable influence over our lives and behavior.*

Heart idolatry can subvert even our most worshipful moments. For example, prayer is our most God-directed act, yet it too can be warped by an idolatrous heart. Have you ever rehearsed a prayer before publicly praying it? (You know, "Our dear Heavenly Father... No, no... Our sovereign, gracious Heavenly Father... no... Father in heaven, we are..."). Why do we do this? Are we trying to get it right for the Lord? That doesn't work because he hears the rehearsal! Isn't it really an attempt to use public prayer to gain the respect of the people around us? Because our hearts are captured by a desire for human approval, we use an act of worship to get glory for ourselves!

This is why the principle of the Ezekiel passage is so important, and why the focus of God's transforming grace is heart change. Our spiritual battle is a war for the heart. When that war is won, people behave in ways that please their Creator. God will never be satisfied with the crumbs of externalism. He rails against this in Isaiah: "These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me" (Isa. 29:13a).

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APPLYING THE PRINCIPLE

My daily behavior is my attempt to get what is important to me in various situations and relationships. My choices and actions always reveal the desires that rule my heart. I never come empty. This is the deepest issue of human experience and a major answer to the question, "Why do people do the things they do?" As James says, we are led away by our own desires (James 1:14).

This principle has several applications for personal growth and ministry.

1. Our hearts are always being ruled by someone or something.
2. The most important question to ask when examining the heart is, "What is functionally ruling this person's heart in this situation?"
3. Whatever controls my heart will control my responses to people and situations.
4. God changes us not just by teaching us to do different things, but by recapturing our hearts to serve him alone.
5. The deepest issues of the human struggle are not issues of pain and suffering, but the issue of worship, because what rules our hearts will control the way we respond to both suffering and blessing.

IT'S A MATTER OF TREASURE

Christ also talked about what rules the heart using the metaphor of treasure, as we see in Matthew 6:19-24:

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!

No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.

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Three principles in this passage speak to what we have been considering.

1. Everyone seeks some kind of treasure. (This is Christ's operating assumption.)
2. Your Treasure will control your heart. ("For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.")
3. What Controls your heart will control your behavior. ("No one can serve two masters.")

There are only two kinds of treasures, earthy and heavenly, and whatever treasures we choose will become our rulers. They exercise control over us, for if something is your treasure, you will live to gain, maintain, and enjoy it. Sadly, we often fail to see this in ourselves, though we can see it in others. One of the most tragic things that could happen to a human being is to invest his life in pursuit of the wrong treasure.

Luella has always been the fire marshal in our family. Whenever we moved into a new house, she explored all the possible exit routes and came up with exit plans in case of fire in various parts of the house. She would then gather the family, explain the plans, and quiz us until she was sure we all knew what to do in an emergency.

This usually worked well, except for the time when I had recently acquired the guitar of my dreams. I had been in a music store buying new strings when I saw a hand-made nine-string guitar. Its sound was more beautiful than any guitar I had ever heard. When I told my mother about it on the phone, in a miracle moment she said that she and my dad would buy it for me. This was more than I had ever hoped for, but in a week, I was the owner of my beloved instrument. Every evening after supper, I would retire to the living room and play, scarcely believing that this guitar belonged to me.

Shortly thereafter, Luella held her fire safety talk around the dinner table. She turned to me and asked, "Paul, if a major fire broke out on the main floor of our house, what would you do?" Without a moment's thought, I responded, "I would run into the living room, grab my guitar, and get it out of the house!" I will never forget the look on the faces of my family, or the silence that seemed to last about a year. Finally, one of my children asked, "What about us, Dad?" My embarrassment and shame were deepened by the look on Luella's face that asked the same question. The guitar in the music store had become a dream, the dream had become a purchase, and the purchase had become a major treasure capable of rearranging my priorities in a fundamental

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way. So it often is. We rarely say, "I am going to set my heart on this thing and let it completely control my life," but that is exactly what happens.

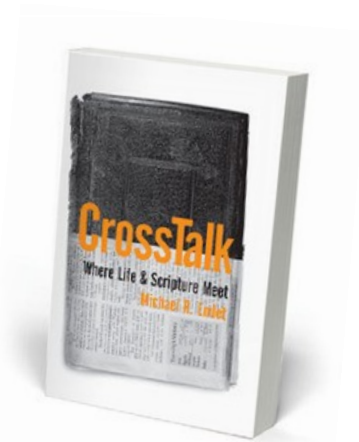
The person you met and mildly enjoyed becomes the person whose approval you cannot live without. The work you undertook to support your family becomes the source of identity and achievement you can't give up. The house you built for the shelter and comfort of your family becomes a temple for the worship of possessions. A rightful attention to your own needs morphs into a self-absorbed existence. Ministry has become more of an opportunity to seek power and approval than a life in the service of God. The things we set our hearts on never remain under our control. Instead, they capture, control, and enslave us. This is the danger of earth-bound treasure.

Every human being is a worshiper, in active pursuit of the thing that rules his heart. This worship shapes everything we do and say, who we are, and how we live. This is why the heart is always our target in personal ministry.



CrossTalk: Where Life and Scripture Meet

The following is an excerpt from the book by Mike Emlet, (Chapter 5). We would highly recommend that you purchase the book in its entirety and believe it would be a great encouragement to you as you walk-alongside your friend. Emlet, Michael R. (2009-11-01). Cross Talk : Where Life and Scripture Meet (p. 80). New Growth Press. Kindle Edition.



Chapter 5

What's Your Story?

The last two chapters argued against a bits-and-pieces approach to the Bible and stressed instead the importance of reading the Bible as one story centering on the coming of Jesus Christ and his renewing rule. This larger, Christ-focused framework is what helps us understand the true significance of the diverse writings that make up the Bible.

But reading the Bible this way is only one side of the equation. To apply Scripture to our contemporary lives, we also need to understand people. We need to learn to "read" people wisely in order to embody the love and truth of Christ to them. Similar to my approach in the last two chapters, I want to give some overarching categories for understanding and approaching people. Getting the big picture will set us up to do more fine-grained work in succeeding chapters.

"Storied" Life

In ministry to others, it is easy to focus on bits and pieces, words and actions that are obvious to others: she yelled at her kids; he hooked up with a prostitute; she cheated on a math test; he gives sacrificially of his time and money to a local homeless shelter; she gave him the silent treatment; he faced the end of his life with dignity and hope. But what is the "narrative skeleton" on which those bits and pieces hang? Like the Bible, the details of our lives add up to a cohesive whole. Despite the diversity of thoughts, actions, emotions, words, situations, and relationships that make up our lives, certain patterns can be discerned. Life histories are going somewhere.

We all have a conception (even if we do so unawares) of how the various aspects of our lives—self-identity, relationships with God and others, experiences, events—relate to one another and give meaning and purpose to life.¹ We all have a grid for making sense of our experiences, a "North Star" by which we navigate life.

In this sense, everyone has a story. Not simply a story to tell but a story (or stories) to live, a plotline that is going somewhere. Or to use another metaphor, the trees do add up to a forest. Observing the details (trees) without discerning the overall pattern (forest) can lead to "ministerial meandering": getting lost in the details of someone's story without providing a biblical map that gives orientation, direction, and destination for the journey.

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One of the key skills for a physician involves "taking a history" from a patient. This involves interviewing a patient intensively and extensively regarding several things: (1) the symptoms that brought him to the doctor or hospital ("history of the present illness"); (2) his past medical history; (3) his family history; (4) his social history, including tobacco, alcohol, or drug use; (5) his medications; and (6) the "review of systems," an extensive list of questions about other body systems besides the one(s) targeted in the history of the present illness. This structured interview is followed by a physical exam and perhaps several diagnostic tests.

Then comes a crucial question: what diagnostic possibilities do these details suggest? What patterns emerge from the information? Failure to discern the patterns in a patient's story can lead to delayed or wrong diagnosis, which can lead to delayed or wrong treatment. The goal of hearing a patient's story is not to assemble a list of details but to discern the medical plotline(s) that best explain and account for those details. This allows a physician to provide the best treatment for them.

In a similar way, if we are to be of real help to others, we need to carefully listen for the patterns that emerge from the details of their lives. They will give clues about how to bring the life-giving gospel to them. Listening to how people make sense of the details of their lives gives a sense of the overarching story or stories that guide their daily existence.

Worldview Questions

A way to speak about the storied quality of human life is to affirm that each person (or community) asks and answers foundational questions about the nature of life, consciously or subconsciously. The answers we give to these questions characterize our "worldview," our "take" on the nature of reality. The Bible itself answers these foundational questions and urges us to live in light of the biblical worldview, the true story of the world. In fact, you might say that even asking these questions shows that we are God's image bearers. As we will see later, the fact that we are broken, fallen image bearers means that we answer those questions in ways that compete with the biblical narrative. Brian Walsh and J. Richard Middleton propose four basic worldview questions:

1. Where are we? That is, what is the nature of the world in which we live?
2. Who are we? Or, what is the essential nature of human beings?
3. What's wrong? That is, why is the world (and my life!) in such a mess?
4. What's the remedy? Or, how can these problems be solved?

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These questions—and how we answer them—form the narrative backbone of our lives. They shape the way we interpret life events, from the mundane (no milk in the refrigerator for the breakfast cereal) to the horrific (loss of children in a car accident). They shape our view of ourselves and others. They shape our vision of what constitutes a meaningful life, even a meaningful moment. They shape our beliefs, emotions, and decisions every day. Everybody has an overarching story he or she lives by, moment by moment. Everybody is a meaning maker with categories for making sense of life. Reality does not come to us unfiltered but always through the lens of our perception. The real question is, What lens will we use? What story, what narrative will we use to see our world and interpret our lives?

A Story from the Outside

Being made in the image of God includes a built-in interpretation of the nature of self and the world. In fact, it includes a built-in basic knowledge of God, of his "eternal power and divine nature" (Rom. 1:20). To be an image bearer is to have the Story imprint—God and his view of reality—upon you! To live in God's world is to be confronted daily with visible reminders of invisible realities (Rom. 1:19).

Notice that even before the fall of humanity into sin, Adam and Eve needed information about God and his world. They needed God's own "take" on his creation, a story line from outside themselves. And what were the elements of that story?⁵ How did God give a framework of meaning and purpose for these newly minted human beings? Take a look at Genesis 1:28—30 and 2:15—17 to find out.

First, God gave them a noble task: multiply and rule the whole earth (Gen. 1:28). For Adam and Eve, being made in God's likeness meant bringing all of creation under God's rule. Their identity as God's image bearers was tightly wedded to a particular purpose, to live as stewards of God's creation.⁶ The garden needed gardeners (Gen. 2:5—8)! Although I wouldn't consider myself an avid gardener, what gardening I do gives a profound sense of satisfaction as I cooperate with God in bringing order, beauty, and fruitfulness to my world. Second, God gave them freedom to eat from seed-bearing plants and trees (Gen. 1:29). It reminded Adam and Eve that the creator God had given this food to them; they were dependent on his generosity.

But third, although God gave them freedom, he did speak a negative word. He prohibited them from eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. He warned them that if they disobeyed, they would die (Gen. 2:16—17).

So there it was. A simple story line. Where are we? "In a beautiful, perfect place created by God." Who are we? "We are God's own image bearers, unique among created things, who are to live in God's creation, bringing his rule to the ends of the earth. We are creatures who are to live under the wise authority of the creator." That's the story by which Adam and Eve and their descendants were to live. But even in Paradise, a competing story line confronted them.

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Competing Stories, Fallen People

While much could be said about the serpent's challenge to God, notice some of the places it cast doubt on God's instruction, added new information, or directly challenged God's authoritative story (Gen. 3:1—5). First the serpent misrepresented God as stingy: "Did God really say, 'you must not eat from any tree in the garden?'" (v. 1). Eve's answer was nearly right: "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, 'you must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die'" (vv. 2—3). Eve added to God's story line, saying that God also said "and you must not touch it [the forbidden fruit]." Now, either God said this and it's simply not noted in the Bible or (more likely) Eve gave her own elaboration to God's word.

In response, the serpent directly challenges God's story ("you will not surely die," v. 4) and adds some enticing details ("For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil," v. 5).⁷ Now Eve faces a choice: Whose story is most authoritative for her life? Which details matter? Whose word counts most?

Unfortunately, Eve chose the details that described a reality where humans were the pinnacle, where the rest of creation, and ultimately God himself, played a supporting role. And so when she "saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it" (Gen. 3:6). In so doing, Adam and Eve effectively answered those first two worldview questions very differently. Where are we? "In a beautiful, perfect world where everything is ripe for the picking." Who are we? "We are independent creatures, free to choose whatever we think will bring us delight. We are creatures who can choose the path to godlike wisdom. We have the power to discern good and evil." It's a very different take on reality, isn't it?

After that, things go downhill pretty fast as pain, toil, misery, sin, and death enter the world.⁸ Since this first deviation from the true story of the universe, humanity has pursued alternate plotlines that exclude the authority of God's design for his creation and his people. Where does this lead? To Cain's slaying of Abel (Gen. 4:1—16). To Lamech's boasting (Gen. 4:19—24). And ultimately to the situation prior to the flood, where the Bible notes that "every inclination of the thoughts of his [mankind's] heart was only evil all the time" (Gen. 6:5). Power, greed, envy, elevation of self before others, blameshifting, vigilantism, injustice, and the like are the themes and practices of story lines that exclude God.

The third worldview question asks, "What's wrong?" The biblical answer is that we have chosen to live autonomously, by story lines of our own creation. We have rejected the idea that we are created worshipers of the living God and meant to image and glorify him in every aspect of our lives. We have embraced other identities, values, and purposes for life. Our thoughts, attitudes, emotions, and actions flow day by day out of these alternate plots. The result fits the description Paul uses in Titus 3:3: "At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another."

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Fortunately, the early chapters of Genesis are not the end of the story! Scripture also provides an answer to the question, "What's the remedy for this mess?" Paul describes it like this: "But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life" (Titus 3:4—7).

God's mission for his people as stewards of his kingdom cannot be thwarted. God's story for his creation cannot be "reauthored," despite the powers of evil seeking to bring a premature and disastrous end to God's design. Rather, God himself will rescue his rebellious and sin-broken people by recreating a "new" people for himself (Israel), who will be a blessing to the nations (Gen. 12:2—3). As we saw in chapter 3, Israel's story and mission ultimately come to fulfillment in Jesus Christ. He, the perfect human and only Son of God, bears the punishment for our sin and is vindicated by his resurrection from the dead. Through the giving of the Holy Spirit, he creates the church, this band of kingdom people who will make disciples of all nations (Matt. 28:19—20), a new creation "echo" of Genesis 1:28.

The Story to Live By

So the issue is this: Will we answer the fundamental questions of life with the biblical story or some other story (or stories)? We will interpret the events of our lives with some overarching assumptions about the nature of ourselves and the world. The Bible is written to show us the true nature of reality. Scripture will either affirm or confront the stories by which we make sense of the details of our daily lives.

As a comprehensive story, the Bible answers the four questions that help us understand ourselves. These basic elements of the story—creation, fall, redemption, and consummation—will shape our worldview. As Richard Harris notes, "A worldview provides the loom for weaving the tapestry of understanding out of the strings of experience." Again, the question is, what "loom" are we using to organize the threads of our experience?

It's easy to say that we are "living by God's story" in some abstract way. But when there is an obvious disconnect between the biblical vision for life and the features of our own lives (which occurs daily, right?!), we must pause and ask, "What alternative stories, interpretations of life, and beliefs are we really living under?" These competing stories guarantee that personal ministry is necessary. Ministry is about helping others see the story lines by which they are living. But what does this look like in practice?

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Discovering the Stories by Which We Live... or Die

Let me illustrate this with a common experience: family dissension on vacation! Not long ago, our family stayed for a week in a cottage on the southern Maine coast. It was April, so we were expecting colder weather. What we didn't expect was the biggest snowstorm of the season, which knocked out power and water for two days. Interestingly, two of us were not especially deterred in our enthusiasm, while the other two (who shall remain nameless!) found what amounted to "indoor camping" less than desirable. (Truth be told, we all wearied of boiling snow for water eventually!)

Now, why did the very same series of events result in one group of people responding one way—taking the challenges in stride, not so much bothered with the lack of showers—and another group responding a different way—grumbling and complaining, wanting to leave early? It was because the complainers in our family were living by a different story line than the more contented members. A functionally different worldview guided the two groups. If we were honest, here's how each pair might have answered the fundamental worldview questions noted above. (OK, with a bit of exaggeration!)

The Complainers

- Where are we? We are on a well-deserved vacation in a place designed to meet our needs.
- Who are we? We are the center of our universe. All of creation is meant to serve us! Nothing matters but our comfort.
- What's wrong? This stupid snowstorm is ruining everything. We expected comfort, relaxation, and no stress.
- What's the solution? We need to escape this nightmare, and we will keep complaining until we do.

The Contented

- Where are we? We are on vacation in a beautiful part of God's creation.
- Who are we? We are servants of God, called to live out the kingdom values of Jesus Christ wherever we are. We are people who are redeemed, yet await the full redemption that Jesus will bring when he returns.
- What's wrong? Something we didn't expect has happened and revealed how demanding and self-centered we are tempted to be. This unexpected situation still exists under the reign of our wise and loving Father. It's also true that, in this time between the first and second comings of Jesus, suffering and hardship are part of the norm of Christian living, as Romans 8:18—23 notes.
- What's the solution? Embrace the snowstorm as God's fatherly design, enjoy the beauty of the snow, ask God for his help in moving from disappointment to contentment, and wisely assess whether it would be better to leave early if we can't shower or flush the toilets!

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Notice how different the overarching stories are that guide the responses of both groups! Notice that the complainers use a self-oriented lens to view events and respond accordingly. The more contented group uses a biblical lens to place the same events within God's larger redemptive story.

This same battle plays out each day in your lives as well. Every time you are harsh with your children, every time you use words to manipulate your spouse, every time you turn the other way when you could have offered assistance, you reveal the self-oriented story you are living by. And every time you choose not to repay evil for evil, every time you welcome the outsider to your fellowship, every time you give yourself in costly sacrifice to your spouse, you reveal the God-oriented story that guides your life. If you're like me, the switch from a God-authored to a self-authored script can happen in an instant!

In our ministry to people we need to notice how the details of their lives point to larger worldviews. As you get to know them, ask the kinds of questions that reveal their motives and thoughts about God, others, themselves, and the world. Acknowledging how hard it is for us to live consistently by God's story keeps us humble as we identify the competing stories of those we serve.

Approaching People as Saints, Sufferers, and Sinners

The Bible does more than lay out a broad story line by which to live. It does more than stay at the level of the worldview questions we just considered. It tailors the contours of the story to people who need to hear how God's redemptive acts impact all aspects of daily life. Geerhardus Vos concurs: "All that God disclosed of Himself has come in response to the practical religious needs of His people as these emerged in the course of history." And how does God speak to his people in response to their needs? He shapes his story to approach his people as saints, sufferers, and sinners.

Why is it important to highlight these aspects of our identity as believers? They describe our experience before Jesus returns to consummate his kingdom. How we live in our "roles" as saints, sufferers, and sinners reveals how aligned we really are with God's Word. Whether or not people are living out their identity as sons or daughters of God reveals how close or far they are from God's redemptive plotline. How people grapple with the nature and purpose of suffering this side of heaven reveals whether or not (in the moment at least) they are living in line with God's overarching story. And how individuals own and act on the sin in their lives also reveals how committed they remain to the details of God's Word.

Another way of saying this is that each person we meet is wrestling in some way with two problems. First, the problem of identity and purpose: who am I and what in the world should I be doing? (This corresponds to God's address to us as saints.) Second, the problem of evil: evil from "without" (which corresponds to our experience as sufferers) and evil from "within" (which corresponds to our experience as sinners).

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Where do we see these distinctions of saint, sufferer, and sinner in Scripture? Notice that these categories are always operating in us simultaneously and implicitly. But a given passage of Scripture often explicitly highlights just one of these aspects. There are passages that more specifically focus on the identity of God's people or comfort the afflicted or deal with issues of sin in the lives of believers. Let's take a closer look.

Saint

First, the very existence of God's Word presupposes the "saint" distinction. God's Word comes to his chosen and beloved people, the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; and it comes to those Gentiles who have been engrafted into Israel's story (Rom. 11). No doubt the term saint finds its fullest expression in the work of Christ—we are saints (literally, "holy" or "set apart" ones) who have been sanctified ("made holy") in Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 1:2; 6:11), but throughout Scripture God addresses his people as those who are set apart for him.

God often explicitly reminds his people who they are. These statements abound in Scripture. Let me highlight a few:

- We are image bearers of the one true God (Gen. 1:26).
- We are those to whom and through whom the blessing of the nations has come (Gen. 12:2—3; Gal. 3:8—9).
- We are part of the community God chose and took for himself (Deut. 4:32—40).
- We are those who are distinguished by the very presence of God (Exod. 33:16).
- We are sanctified and justified in Christ Jesus (1 Cor. 1:2; 6:11).
- We are chosen, redeemed, forgiven children of God in Christ, who have been given the Holy Spirit (Eph. 1:3—14; Gal. 4:6—7).
- We are "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God" (see 1 Pet. 2:4—11)

Notice how closely connected the identity of God's people is to God himself. We are defined by our relationship with him! In a world that beckons people to define themselves by false and fading identities based on looks, intelligence, wealth, power, or success, this is good news! Unlike worldly definitions of identity, our identity and inheritance in Christ never fades (1 Pet. 1:3—4). In our Bible reading, we should be on the lookout for how God's Word addresses us as saints, as people set apart for our good and his glory. This will prepare us to speak to people who may have forgotten who they really are!

CrossTalk: Where Life and Scripture Meet

Sufferer

What about the "role" of sufferer? Again, Scripture assumes that, since the fall, the people God has chosen are sufferers. They are constantly faced with evils from outside themselves. Here are a few places where this is clear in Scripture:

- The exodus from Egypt. Exodus 3:7—8 is particularly instructive: "The LORD said, 'I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians.'"
- In Judges you see the Israelites crying out to God for deliverance from the oppression of foreign nations. We hear that "the LORD had compassion on them as they groaned under those who oppressed and afflicted them" (Judg. 2:18). Interestingly, these early chapters also reveal that God himself was the one who handed his people over to their enemies because of Israel's idolatry. In Judges (and throughout Scripture), sin and suffering are intertwined. You don't see an artificial wedge between the two. God takes sin seriously, and God takes suffering seriously (even when the suffering stems from sinful choices!). God is compassionate toward sinners who suffer because of their own sin. He doesn't shrug his shoulders indifferently toward the wayward and oppressed Israelites, as if to say, "I told you so."
- The psalmists (especially in lament psalms such as 13, 22, 44, 88, and others) cry out to God in their misery, expecting his intervention, for God "has not despised or disdained the suffering of the afflicted one; he has not hidden his face from him but has listened to his cry for help" (Ps. 22:24).
- God calls to account those who oppress and perpetrate injustice upon others (Jer. 23; Ezek. 34; Amos).
- Paul notes that this life involves "groaning" in the midst of suffering (Rom. 8:18—27).
- The books of Hebrews, 1 Peter, and Revelation are written to suffering communities, giving hope, perspective, and direction in the midst of their suffering and persecution.

It is clear from Scripture that suffering is a significant thread that runs through the story of God's people. In Jesus and because of his resurrection, the saints long for the time when "there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain" and God "will wipe every tear from their eyes" (Rev. 21:4). But meanwhile, believers suffer as people united to their Savior, who endured suffering prior to his glory.

CrossTalk: Where Life and Scripture Meet

Sinner

Thirdly, consider the aspect of living as a sinner. Scripture assumes that its hearers and readers need redemption since humanity's fall into sin. The Bible presupposes that we are faced incessantly with evils from within ourselves. Sin's pervasive reality is like gravity that continually pulls the people of God downward. It should prompt the question Paul asks: "Who will rescue me from this body of death?" (Rom. 7:24). Ultimately, nothing but the sacrifice of Christ can redeem sinners (Heb. 7:26—27 and elsewhere in Hebrews; 2 Cor. 5:21).

Every page of the Bible is addressed implicitly to sinners, but here are several places where the gravity and insanity of sin stare us full in the face.

- "The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time" (Gen. 6:5).
- In Leviticus, the sacrificial system was a multisensory reminder of the reality and wages of sin. Sinners seeking restoration with God would hear the cry of the slaughtered animal, see the crimson stain, feel the slip and stick of blood, and smell the burning sacrifice. There was no getting around the seriousness of breaking God's law, even unintentionally.
- The book of Judges highlights that "everyone did as he saw fit" (Judg. 21:25) and records one of the most horrific acts in all Scripture (Judg. 19).
- First and Second Kings reveal the dissolution of the Davidic/ Solomonic kingdom into Israel and Judah and narrate the inexorable slide of God's people into idolatry, leading to the destruction of both nations. Experiencing the consequences of their sins did not dissuade them from their rebellion (see Amos 4).
- Only the intervention of God himself—a heart transplant!—can cure his people of their backsliding (Jer. 3, especially 3:22; Ezek. 36:24—32; 37).

You might say that such a dismal picture of sin and its consequences is appropriate for the Old Testament, but what about the New Testament? Didn't Jesus conquer sin? Hasn't the age of the Spirit dawned? Yes, but the New Testament also teaches that we live in the "overlap of the ages," the time between Jesus' resurrection and his return. Through Jesus, the age to come has broken into this present evil age (Gal. 1:3—4). He gives us his Spirit as the "firstfruits" of God's new creation, guaranteeing that we will experience the full harvest of redemption, including resurrection (Rom. 8:23; Eph. 1:13—14). Although redemption has already been accomplished through Jesus Christ, it is not yet fully realized for God's people (Phil. 3:12—14). Continued struggle with sin—war between flesh and Spirit—characterizes our living in the overlap of the ages.

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Clearly, the New Testament epistles reveal that new life in Christ was by no means "automatic." God's people struggled with the continued presence of sin. They needed instruction, confrontation, encouragement, and warning. The New Testament writers proclaimed the finished work of Christ, but they also affirmed the challenge of applying that finished work to daily life. Every church continued to wrestle with competing stories about where identity, meaning, and purpose were found. Every group of believers struggled to close the gap between the indicatives and the imperatives of the gospel. Each church grappled with how to see and do life through the new eyes the gospel gave.

That ongoing struggle was the womb for the personal ministry of the apostles and New Testament writers! We, too, have the privilege of helping people identify and forsake the siren songs of the world, the flesh, and the devil.

To conclude, the Bible speaks to our experiences as saints, sufferers, and sinners. God's redemptive words confirm our identity as the chosen people of God, console and comfort his afflicted people, and confront the ways we turn away from his character and redemptive work. The worldview the Scriptures present is not depersonalized, as if we could ask the four worldview questions in abstraction. Rather, we are meant to enter into the story of God in the very personal experiences of life lived as saints, sufferers, and sinners. As we'll see in the next chapters, our use of Scripture must have that same multifaceted nature.

Ignorance Is Not Bliss!

What happens in ministry if we ignore these broad categories for understanding people? If we miss the fact that people have a dominant story (or stories) that shapes and directs the course of their lives, ministry will look a lot like putting out multiple brush-fires. Have you experienced that? Stamping out a fire one week only to find the hose is needed again the following week? Why is that? Without considering the shaping stories of people's lives, we'll provide solution-focused counsel but perhaps miss the roots of the problem. We will use a weed-whacker rather than pull up stubborn problems by their roots! This is not to say that troubleshooting is a bad thing. In fact, in crisis situations (e.g., domestic violence or suicidal threats) I'm not necessarily asking about shaping stories; I take action to preserve life and dig deeper later. But as a whole, if we don't recognize people's functional worldviews, we won't make much sense of the thoughts, attitudes, words, and actions that flow out of their overarching stories. People don't need compartmentalized solutions for compartmentalized problems. They need the liberating story of redemption that gradually reunites the various aspects of their lives to be in line with gospel truth.

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If we fail to consider the category of "saint," we will be tempted to focus entirely on the "not yet" aspect of people's lives. Rather than celebrate the marks of redemption already present, we will focus on what they still lack. I think about this as a parent. It's appropriate for me to point out my children's sin and encourage them to repent. It's appropriate to train them to live differently, in line with biblical truth. But here's the rub: I catch them doing things wrong, but do I catch them doing something right?! Do I affirm where I see the Spirit at work in their lives? How often do I tell them how glad I am to be their father? As we will see in chapter 7, Paul does this with his spiritual children frequently. If we don't model our ministry with that same emphasis, affirming identity in Christ and the fruit of the Spirit in people's lives, they may become discouraged, unmotivated, or just plain angry.

What happens if we ignore the category of "sufferer" in people we serve? We will be insensitive to the relational and circumstantial challenges people face. We will minimize sin committed against them and maximize sin they commit. In our zeal to call people to account for their sin, we will overlook injustice done to them. We will miss the ways they experience the pain of their problems. Bottom line, we will miss their cry for help. I'll never forget one of the early counseling classes I took with Paul Tripp. We watched a videotaped first session with a very angry, blameshifting man.

Our assignment for the next week was to consider how we might approach this man. I figured that I had one shot with this guy. I suspected that no matter what I said, he would resist my counsel and would not return for another appointment. So I let him have it with both barrels (on paper, at least!). I lobbed mortar after mortar of biblical truth to blow up his self-oriented ways of living. Not bad, I thought. Maybe he'll take what I've said and the Spirit will use it later. Then I returned to class to hear Paul speak about the importance of connecting with this man's pain as a first step to help him. "Otherwise, he may never return," he said. Ouch! Guilty as charged! It's not that this man didn't have sin issues, but the first priority was to connect with his experience as a sufferer. Remember, most people seek help because they are suffering and need hope.

Lastly, if we minimize the category of "sinner," we water down the reality that people are responsive and responsible image bearers. Jeremiah's indictment will be true of us: "They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. 'Peace, peace,' they say, when there is no peace" (Jer. 6:14; also 8:11). We do people no favors when we overlook their self-destructive (and others-destructive) patterns. God's design is that his children might increasingly reflect the character of Christ. Peter captures it well: "As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: 'Be holy, because I am holy'" (1 Pet. 1:14—16). Our adoption as sons and daughters means that we act in keeping with our royal inheritance. Real faith produces tangible change, as the book of James notes (2:14—17).

You can see that all three perspectives are critical for balanced ministry. This is not to say that we can know anyone exhaustively nor that we have to flesh out these categories fully before we can move into someone's life. But they serve as touchstones of human experience that guide our efforts to understand people.

CrossTalk: Where Life and Scripture Meet

Time to Connect

Over the last three chapters, I have given a broad overview for reading the Bible and reading people. Now I want to consider how to bring these two readings together. How do we practically connect the narrative of the gospel with the narrative of people's lives? How does God's story engage us fully in our experience as saints, sufferers, and sinners? That is the direction of the second half of the book.

Discussion Questions

1. When someone shares with you the joys and difficulties of life, what overarching categories do you use to understand the details of that person's life?
2. Consider your own life and the lives of those you are serving. What competing stories (interpretations of reality) threaten to drown out the all-encompassing perspective of God's Word? (It may help to revisit the four worldview questions.)
3. What hinders you when you seek to bring God's redemptive message into your life? Into others' lives?
4. Which of the three aspects of our experience—saint, sufferer, and sinner—do you most identify with? Why?
5. Which of the three aspects do you find easiest to address in those you serve? Why? What hinders balance in your approach?