

TRANSFORMING OUR HEARTS

Spiritual Formation And The Human Will

INTRODUCTION

One of the important topics I cover in premarital counseling is parenting and one of the most important principles I teach is called *Teaching the Moral Reason Why*. I learned this principle from *Growing Kids God's Way*. *Teaching the Moral Reason Why* is simply the practice of explaining to our children the moral or ethical reason behind the things we do and the things we don't do.

For example, if we are out on a walk and our pre-schooler runs through Mr. Smith's flower bed we need to do two things: we need to correct our child that we do not run through the flower bed, but we stay on the sidewalk and we need to explain to him or her why we do not run through Mr. Smith's flower bed: we do not run through Mr. Smith's flowerbed because Jesus teaches us to love our neighbor as we love ourselves:

[Matthew 22:37-40](#)

³⁷And he (Jesus) said to him (a lawyer), "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. ³⁸This is the great and first commandment. ³⁹And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. ⁴⁰On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets."

You go on to explain to little Billy that we show our love for Mr. Smith by respecting his property and taking good care of his flowerbed.

Now, let me be clear: the child's obedience to my command not to walk in the flower bed is not dependent on his or her understanding the moral reason why. That is another principle called *First Command Obedience*. You are not instructing them to persuade them. Their obedience is a non-negotiable. You are instructing them to shape their character, to help them be able to think morally and ethically as they mature. So, after your child has obeyed your instructions after the first command, you teach them the Moral Reason Why behind what you have told them to do.

Now, the next time or at least after a few more times of instruction, when your little cherub comes upon a flowerbed, rather than just mindlessly following his impulse to tramp around in the flowerbed or to make a short cut, the idea that he is to love his neighbor as himself will come before his mind and guide him to walk on the sidewalk rather than in Mr. Smith's flower bed. Each time your child has this thought and acts on it, he is developing a habit of thought and action that eventually results in his character. Character is simply the collection of our habitual actions.

At a very young age, a child's character is really just a reflection of the parent's character. If your child is undisciplined and disobedient it is because you the parent are undisciplined and disobedient to the authorities in your life such as God and civil government. You see, and this is important you understand this, the child cannot bring before its mind the moral reasons for its behavior – that's your job as a parent in the earliest years of your child's character development. Now, as your child's cognitive capacity increases, your child becomes more and more responsible for the development

of his or her character. The goal is to raise young men and women who can think morally and ethically and who through such clear thinking develop good character.

As our children grow and mature, we need to continue to talk to them about the Moral Reasons Why we do what we do and why we don't do the things we don't do. For instance, in our children's teenage years, you would think that the reason we teach our teenagers not to have sex is because we don't want them to get pregnant. But is that the moral reason why we teach abstinence until marriage? We need to go beyond the rule to encourage our young men and women to think more deeply about their sexuality and their self control. We need to go beyond "Don't you dare!" to "Have you ever thought about this?" Why?

Because our character is shaped by our will and our will is dependent upon our minds. Every action, every decision we make flows from what we are thinking, what we believe, our image or picture of reality, of God, of ourselves and of others.

We need to understand this crucial principle in Christian spiritual transformation:

POINT #1:

The will is totally dependent in its functioning upon the contents of the mind (thoughts and feelings).

Perhaps now you can see why it is so important to teach our children beginning at a young age the moral reasons for the behavior we expect of them. Returning to the flower bed illustration: what good does it do in the long term to simply tell your child not to walk in Mr. Smith's flower bed without teaching them the reason why? We may get compliance in the immediate situation, but our child has no idea why they can't walk around in the nice dirt and pick some of the pretty flowers. All he knows is that Mommy doesn't want him to walk there. So what happens if he walks by this flower bed without Mommy? He'll decide to follow his bodily desire to play in the nice dirt and pick the pretty flowers because Mommy is not there and she won't find out. This is why so many of our Christian young people leave home and leave the Christian faith. They get out from under Mom and Dad's authority and they go wild with the freedom they have because they have not been trained to think deeply, morally and ethically, about their behavior; they've just been trained to try and not get in trouble with Mom and Dad.

Without a source of input from outside himself, the young child doesn't receive the information he or she needs to make right choices and to develop a character that is good and thoughtful of others. Left to themselves, children will become completely committed to fulfilling their bodily desires; they will worship themselves. Good parenting is giving good input to our children when they are young and disciplining them to live according to the truth. To love God and to love others.

But as I said before, as our children grow they become more and more responsible for their character because they increase in the capacity to choose what they think about and even what they choose to feel. This brings us to a very important second principle of Christian spiritual transformation concerning our hearts, our wills.

POINT #2

The condition of our *minds* (thoughts and feelings) is very much affected by the direction in which our *will* is set.

If its true that the functioning of our will is totally dependent upon the contents of our mind, so it is true that the condition of our minds is very much affected by the direction in which our will is set.

We really do choose what we think about and we choose what we allow ourselves to feel.

Here is an example. Psalm 1:1 says:

Psalm 1:1 *¹Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; ²but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night.*

Do you see here in this instance where the will is involved? With his will, his heart, the blessed man chooses to bring before his mind the law of God throughout the day and night. The blessed man decides to read and memorize Scripture and chooses to bring it to mind throughout the day as he goes about his business. And at night he chooses to spend time reading or turning over Scripture in his mind before he sleeps. Could this same man decide to read material other than the Scriptures? Could this man choose to think about other things during the day (during discretionary times) Could this man choose to spend his evenings doing something else?

By deciding what he is going to think about, the blessed man orients his thoughts and feelings towards God and this in turn affects his will, the choices he makes over and over – and this forms his character.

On the other hand, the person who does not have exposure to God's Word or to Christian literature is thinking about something and that something directs his will and the choices that he makes and this in turn forms his character.

Now how does all this play out in our relationship with Jesus? Through His death, burial and resurrection, Jesus has purchased forgiveness of our sins so that we can be restored to God. But through His presence in us mediated through the Holy Spirit Who dwells within us and through His Word, Jesus also wants to transform our character to truly become like Him. This is God the Father's will for us. This is the goal of our salvation. Romans 8:26-30

Romans 8:26-30

*²⁶Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. ²⁷And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. ²⁸And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. ²⁹For those whom he **foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son**, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. ³⁰And those whom he predestined he also*

called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

God's goal for your life and mine is a profound transformation of our character to become like Jesus. To think like Jesus. To feel the same emotions Jesus felt. To live the life of impact Jesus lived. To love people the way Jesus loved people.

This is possible if we want it. If we want to become like Jesus, we can, but it is a matter of our will. We must move beyond desire to action and put before our minds the Words of God through reading the Scripture, through listening to Christian teaching, through reading Christian books.

But we must also decide what we will not let into our minds. I don't need to go into this very deeply because you understand, but I do want you to realize this also means the thoughts that come from within ourselves that are not good. We can choose to dwell on a perceived wrong done to us and play that over and over in our minds. We carry on these conversations in our heads about what we would say to that other person; how we would answer their accusations or give them a piece of our minds. Such thinking simply sours us and moves us into bondage to bitterness and broken or superficial relationships in our families and in our churches. We can choose not to let those thoughts occupy our minds. And we must choose this if we are going to make significant progress in the life of Christ.

Similarly, we can choose to let fantasies occupy our minds or not to let them occupy our thoughts. The point is, though our will, our heart depends upon our mind to function and make decisions so also our will affects our mind by choosing what ideas and images it will bring before our minds.

In closing, let's play this out in real life.

After another blowout with his wife, a Christian man thinks to himself, "Man, I really shouldn't talk to my wife like that." He is genuinely sorry for treating his wife so poorly. Now what is it going to take for his character to change so that he treats his wife better? His character at the moment is to treat his wife badly. His voice is trained to get louder, his face to get red, his body to get ridged. He does all this automatically without thinking about it because he's trained his body to react this way to his wife. How does this change? It does not change in the heat of the moment! These character traits can only change over time and not in the heat of the moment. But he must choose to place before his mind, the correct information that will lead to new and better choices in how he relates to his wife. He must choose to think upon such truths as:

Ephesians 4:29

²⁹Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.

Ephesians 5:25

²⁵Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her...

Colossians 3:12-15

¹²Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, ¹³bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. ¹⁵And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful.

1 Peter 3:7

⁷Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered.

It is only as this man, through a decision of his will, brings truths like these before his mind and meditates on these passages and reflects upon his behavior and what that reveals about what he believes and he repents of the lies and the wrong images he has of himself and God and his wife that his character changes. God will meet him there and God's Spirit will grace to such a man and renew his thinking which in turn will transform his character such that treating his wife poorly will become absolutely unthinkable to him.

This can and does happen in those who through the act of their will, put before their minds God's truth.

But why doesn't this happen in more Christian's lives? Because we have divided hearts....

We'll talk about this more in our next time together.