

TRANSFORMING OUR HEARTS

From Fragmented to Focused

INTRODUCTION

In our previous session together we were thinking about the relationship between our minds and our wills. The first point we emphasized was that

POINT #1:

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

This is true in the heat of the moment. The decisions I am making right this moment flow from what I am thinking and feeling at this moment. My mind, to a large degree, controls my immediate actions. I say “to a large degree” because some of my actions are automatic in the sense that I am not having to think about them directly). Having said this about the mind’s influence on the will, we also talked about the fact that the will plays a huge role in directing our minds over the long term. This is good news because this opens the way for genuine change in our character. Here is the second point we emphasized in our previous study:

POINT #2

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

We really do choose what we think about. We choose every day, throughout the day what ideas and images will occupy our thoughts. As we studied the blessed man of Psalm 1 we observed that he chooses to not allow the ideas of the wicked to occupy his mind but he chooses to bring the ideas and images of God to his mind throughout the day and night:

Psalm 1:1 ¹*Blessed 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.*

The blessed man makes a choice with his heart to read the Law and turn it over in his mind throughout the day. Without a doubt this shapes his ideas and images of the world and his role and responsibility in it. The blessed man’s thoughts and feelings are shaped by the Word of God and lead to decisions that are good, helpful to others around him and honoring to God. As he continues meditate on God’s Word he continues make decisions consistent with the Law his character becomes that of a good and godly man.

We illustrated this process in the life of a Christian man who realizes that he treats his wife poorly. The good news is that he can change. But he cannot change in the heat of the moment nor can he change as a result of one church service nor can he change by a massive exertion of his will. Character change does not come about by any of these means. He will change when he decides with his heart, his will, to fill his thoughts with

the truth of God's Word. God's Word will challenge and change this man's ideas and images of God, of himself, of his wife and of his marriage. His ideas and feelings will change and he will choose to treat his wife with tender sensitivity and servant leadership. Over time treating his wife poorly will become completely foreign to him. He will have been transformed because of the direction in which he set his will – to bring to his mind the thoughts of God.

But then I ended with an observation that all of us know is true – this kind of radical character transformation does not happen very often among Christians. The question is “why not?” And the answer in large part is that...

we have fractured, splintered hearts

Do you know how to catch a monkey? Chain to a tree a hollowed out gourd that has an opening just big enough to slip in an empty hand. Into the gourd place a fresh, ripe banana and wait. When that monkey sees that banana he reaches, in clamps his hand around that banana and he won't let go. So strong is his desire for that banana it will overcome his desire for freedom.

Where there are competing desires there is little progress toward Christlikeness.

What does a will look like that has been transformed into Christlikeness? I appreciate Dallas Willard's answer to this question:

Single-minded and joyous devotion to God and His will, to what God wants for us – and to service to Him and to others because of Him.

But as we know this is very far from the typical human will and character even among Christians and this is because:

we worship ourselves and instead of pursuing the good God created us to do, we are committed to getting our own way.

God chooses not to override our will nor force us to take on a specific character. He allows our character to develop according to our choices.

This is what James addresses in James 4:1-10:

James 4:1-10

¹What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? ²You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. ³You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. ⁴You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. ⁵Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, “He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us”? ⁶But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.” ⁷Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. ⁹Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned

to mourning and your joy to gloom. ¹⁰Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

It is our double mindedness that causes all kinds of problems. But this can change in Christ. And the process begins with *surrender*.

Surrender is the first step toward single minded devotion to the will of God. Surrender is that step wherein we consent to God's supremacy in all things.

We may do so grudgingly at first, but this is the important first step. At a minimum this decision is a willingness to be made willing in ways we are not now willing to embrace God's will. As God's grace and wisdom begun to work in us who surrender, we move on to *abandonment*.

Abandonment is *full* surrender to God. While God may allow hardships to happen in our lives, we accept them as within His plan for good to those who love Him and are living in His purposes (Romans 8:28). We stop stressing and wondering, "Will God do what I want?"

Beyond surrender and abandonment is *contentment*.

Contentment is the assurance that God has done and will always do well by us – no matter what. Gratitude and joy are the steady tone of our lives.

The ultimate goal of this progression into the will of God is *participation*.

Participation is the intelligent, energetic focusing of our energies to accomplish God's will in our world. We are no longer spectators, but fully engaged players in the great drama of what God is doing around us in others and in the world.

How do we step into this process to become those who have a:

**Single-minded and joyous devotion to God and His will, to what God wants for us
– and to service to Him and to others because of Him.**

Step One:

We must forsake our double-mindedness. We must become conscious of it, confront it and take appropriate steps to forsake it.

Step Two:

We must focus on the explicit teachings of the Bible concerning the will of God. If we intend to do God's will we must begin with what God has clearly stated to be His will. This is what Jesus told His disciples

John 14:21 ²¹*Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him."*

For instance, who of us doesn't know that it is God's will we should be without guile (deceit) and malice? Then let us decide never to mislead people and never to do or say things merely to cause pain or harm. Let us choose today, right now, we will not do such things. You may think this is a small thing, but lying and malice are foundational

sins that lead to many other sins. Now as we make this decision we discover how deep seated are these practices in every dimension of our being. We will need God's grace and help and He will help us if it is His will that we want.

The encouraging thing in all of this is to know that God stands ready to respond to any movement of our hearts towards Him. He is seeking those who desire to worship Him in spirit and in truth. We don't even need to know very much about Him to receive His grace and power in our lives. Edith Schaeffer tells the true story of a man from Lisu tribe far out in the hills back of China. There was in him a great longing for a God he did not know. One day he found on a mountain path a page torn from a Lisu catechism. He read: "Are there more gods than One?" – "no, there is only One God." "Should we worship idols?" – "No..." And the rest was torn away.

He went home and destroyed his alters. Immediately his daughter became very ill and his neighbors taunted him for making the demons angry. The man thought if there was one true God perhaps he could reach that God with his voice. He knew nothing about prayer, but he climbed to the top of the highest peak in the vicinity – twelve or fourteen thousand feet high – and shouted out, "Oh, God if You really are there and You are the One I am to worship, please make my little girl well again."

It took a long time to climb back down, but upon arriving home he found the little girl completely well, with no time of recuperation needed. She had recovered at the time he had prayed. That man became an effective evangelist across the entire area. Edith Schaeffer comments: "There will be so many stories to compare with this man's that I picture us taking thousands of years to find out about them all" This is because of the seeking God who constantly "monitors" hearts.¹

¹ Renovation, pp.149-150.