

The Heart of the Matter

Lesson 1: Why Do We Do the Things We Do?

1. The Free Moral Agency of Man

That which sets man apart from animals is the ability to reason and decide. Animals behave on an instinctive level, and they have a limited ability to learn from cause and effect. While we may kill animals that have caused death or destruction, we do not “punish” them as morally accountable creatures. A shark or a crocodile kills because it has been “programmed” to do so; it is his nature.

Humans, on the other hand, are constructed differently. We have been endowed with the power of choice. While there are some instinctive actions in our make-up (a baby’s suckling response; flinching, etc.), the fabric of our lives is woven largely from individual decisions. We choose to come or go, to love or hate, to learn or remain ignorant, to marry or not, to help or injure.

But with this freedom to act comes a frightful consequence: Our Maker has declared that He will hold us accountable for what we decide. We implicitly recognize and affirm this principle whenever we declare a man guilty of the violation of law and punish him. Justice says, in effect, “You behaved wrongly and you should have done differently.”

“Fate,” “karma” and Calvinistic predestination are not Biblical concepts. Man has created such doctrines to relieve him of the terrible guilt spawned by the knowledge that we have not lived as we know we should. When we choose to act, it is vital that we choose wisely.

2. What Affects Our Choices?

When we do make a choice, there are a number of things that influence our decision. We are not always conscious of these forces, but we have been shaped and conditioned by them in powerful ways.

Genetic predisposition is not to be ignored. While our technical knowledge of genetics has greatly increased, it has largely served to confirm what was formerly known by observation: Some children are born with the temperaments and tendencies of their parents already in place. Some are headstrong; others are compliant; some have a “short fuse”; others are passive; some are optimistic; others are anxious and fretful.

Parental nurturing also has a significant bearing upon our deliberative process. Parents’ values will flavor the entire atmosphere in which children are raised. The mixing of these values with genetic predisposition can be volatile: They might be complimentary and reinforce one another, or they may clash and set a youngster up for confusion. We might also include sibling influence in this equation.

Peer groups increasingly exert influence upon humans as they broaden their interactions with the world. When it is discovered that there is life outside the immediate family, a tremendous amount of pressure is applied to gain favor and approval from that larger constituency.

Self-interest is at first a survival instinct. For instance, a baby will insistently cry at all hours of the night until comforted. But as life progresses, such self-interest can turn from survival to self-indulgent

pleasure. We may choose to act simply because *we like the outcome*, regardless of the consequences or impact upon others.

All of these influences seethe and swirl within our minds and are gradually forged into a mindset, a value system or a set of **attitudes** that define who we are as a person. We may camouflage our true selves by speaking or acting in a way different from our real attitudes, thus deceiving others (and perhaps ourselves).

But our real identity is revealed more often than we know, and it is always seen by God.

3. Discovering Our Own Attitudes

We jokingly speak of people in need of an “attitude adjustment.” In reality, we need to be constantly adjusting our attitudes to conform to the standards of God. (Since this lesson deals with the “Christian’s attitude,” we will assume that those who study the material already acknowledge the value of God’s approval. We who believe in God fundamentally agree that God’s standards for us are valid and superior.)

One of the first problems we encounter is identifying what our *real* attitudes are. This requires two basic qualities: self-awareness and honesty. First, we must learn to study and evaluate ourselves. “What do I think and why do I think it?” “What are my basic desires?” “Why do I favor option A as opposed to option B?” “What is my real motive?” These are uncomfortable questions to ask ourselves because the answers may be less than flattering. We sometimes assign to ourselves higher motives than we deserve, and to preserve the illusion we hesitate to peer very deeply into our own soul. Secondly, unless we are honest with ourselves, we will plow ahead through life

with thoughts and attitudes that God finds abominable even as we attend worship, read our Bibles, pray and speak religious lingo.

The most reliable way to study ourselves and dispassionately discern our true attitudes is to compare ourselves with the revelation of God. God, as our Maker, knows His human product better than we know ourselves. He knows what makes us tick – physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. The Scriptures reveal our true inner self, even as a photograph depicts our outer qualities.

at·ti·tude: **2a:** a mental position with regard to a fact or state **b:** a feeling or emotion toward a fact or state ... **6:** an organismic state of readiness to respond in a characteristic way to a stimulus (as an object, concept, or situation) (*Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*, p. 114)

Heb 4:12-13 – The word of God (only the written remains) “*is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.*” Of “discerner” (Gk. *kritikos*) Vine says: “fit for, or skilled in, judging (Eng., critical), found in Heb. 4:12, of the Word of God ... i.e., discriminating and passing judgment on the thoughts and feelings” (Vol. 1, p. 315). A.T. Robertson comments, “Psychology is constantly changing its terminology” (Vol. 5, p. 363). How true; even the whole Freudian way of analyzing the human mind is giving way to modern postulates and theories. But the Scriptures stand unchanged, a rock-solid testimony to the Maker’s analysis of the human mind and motivations. The written word is the key to understanding ourselves.

Jas 1:21-25 – James connects the importance of *hearing* the word and then *doing* or *conforming* to it. He likens the failure of this obligation to looking into a mirror and promptly forgetting one’s outward appearance. Likewise, if we look into the “perfect law of liberty” we will see our inner self – flaws and all. We then can make adjustments, as we do with our hair or clothing after looking into a mirror. This is the way by which the implanted word is able to save our souls (Jas 1:21).

4. Cultivating Godly Attitudes

While genetics, nurture, peer pressure and self-interest all come to bear upon us, there is one overriding equalizer: We have volition or the sovereign right to choose what we will be. We have *free will*. Consider these Biblical examples of men and women who chose to go against the grain of their family and cultural influences:

Joseph: Neither parental favoritism nor sibling rejection, neither imprisonment nor political power, neither threat nor lust could shake him from due regard for God. His attitude was one of trust in and respect for God: *“How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?”* (Gen. 39:9).

Moses: Moses did not succumb to the trappings of Egyptian religion, power and privilege. He *chose* to identify himself with the people of God and suffer whatever came with it (Heb 11:25).

Rahab: This woman was thoroughly steeped in Gentile religion and culture. Yet she realized something about the threatening nation amassing across the Jordan. Its God was different from the idols. Thus, in faith (Heb 11:31) Rahab abandoned idolatry and put her trust in Jehovah.

Josiah: Josiah’s grandfather, Manasseh, was the most wicked Judean king in history, surpassing even the wickedness of the Canaanites who inhabited the land before him (2 Kings 21:11). In spite of Manasseh’s later repentance, Josiah could very well have followed in the footsteps of his grandfather’s ungodliness. Instead, this young man became one of Judah’s most zealous reformers.

Daniel: Like Joseph, Daniel was plucked from his home and deposited in a foreign land. Unlike Joseph, however, Daniel did not have his native home to inspire him, for it had been destroyed and all the population scattered. Daniel had *nothing* in terms of family, society, country to define himself, and he was immersed in a heathen culture that would have slowly assimilated a man of lesser faith. But Daniel made a series of conscious choices not to surrender his faith or his obedience to heathen influences. He maintained his integrity and convictions in spite of the fact that all odds were stacked against him.

Paul: We only need to reflect briefly upon the great apostle to understand the power of free will. What he sacrificed and suffered for the sake of Christ should silence once and for all those who claim that “society” is wholly responsible for the choices made by individuals.

5. What Really Matters?

What really matters in this life is learning what God would have us to be and then abandoning everything contrary to that model. This is not a process of outward conformity but inward change:

“But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord” (2 Cor. 3:18).

What, then, is our attitude toward the world around us? We are daily confronted with choices concerning people, (friends, enemies, family) material things, sinful opportunities, employment, recreation, time (past, present and future), worship and a host of other things. What do we choose? Why do we choose it? Are we choosing that which would please God?

Questions for Discussion

- 1.** Will a righteous man's son always choose to follow in his father's steps (Ezek. 18:5-13)?

- 2.** Is a wicked man's son doomed to repeat his father's wicked ways (Ezek. 18:14-18)?

- 3.** Is a wicked man necessarily doomed by his own sins (Ezek. 18:21-23)?

- 4.** From where do the things which defile a man originate (Matt. 15:17-20)?

- 5.** Can one be guilty of sin without committing an overt act? Explain.

- 6.** Look up the word "heart" in a concordance. List three Scriptures where the word refers to inward attitudes.

- 7.** What was God's assessment of the human heart in Jer. 17:9-10? Compare this observation with conditions in Noah's day (Gen 6:5).