



**November 20, 2023**

### **What's Inside Matters**

Most of you are probably familiar with a white elephant gift exchange. The idea is to bring a beautifully wrapped present containing some sort of gag gift. Each person gets a chance to pick out a gift and most often the one that looks the most enticing is the most disappointing or silly. I remember getting a rotten pumpkin once and another time a lovely looking package contained someone's old baseball trophy. What was on the inside was nothing like what it looked like on the outside.

We are told in the Bible that people judge by outward appearances but God looks at our hearts. 1Samuel 16:7. There are at least 800 to 1,000 references to the heart in scripture so it must be very important to God. Proverbs calls the heart the wellspring of life. Jesus laments that his people honor him with their lips but their hearts are far from him and says that out of their hearts come evil thoughts, and all sorts of sinful, immoral behavior as well as hurtful and complaining words. In other words what is in our hearts determines what we say and do. The health of our hearts determines the health of our lives in many ways- physically, emotionally and spiritually. The true test for followers of Jesus is the condition of our hearts. God sees if my faith is fake or real; whether I am whole hearted or halfhearted in trusting him; and if I'm sincerely loving him with all my heart and mind and soul and strength. So, I must ask God to search me and know my heart and to point out what is really going on inside of me. Psalm 139:23-24

I like the image of picturing my heart as The Garden Within, the title of a book by Anita Phillips. She says "Your emotional well-being influences every other dimension of your life, including your spirit...Approach your heart as a garden. It is the soil of your life...God is in the process of making all things new including our hearts. He is pruning, weeding and tilling the soil in our hearts to make us more like Christ."

I'm learning that this transformation requires my cooperation and participation. I'm becoming aware that God wants more than my mental agreement to his teachings. He wants a heartfelt YES to a whole new way of life. For example, as I look back on my early years as a parent I realize that no matter how many parenting books I read and how much I wanted to be a good parent I couldn't seem to put into practice what I wanted to do. Now I see that the reason was because inside I was still being governed by a heart that hadn't been transformed. I was being controlled by my impatience and desire to mold my children into my image of who they should be not by the patient, unconditional love of God lived out through me. Therefore, my critical spirit erupted with anger and harsh words.

So, what am I doing to allow God to work in the garden of my heart? It takes times of solitude, silence and being still in God's presence to allow him to have all of my attention. I pray each day asking him to "create a clean heart in me and to renew a right spirit within me" (Psalm 52:10) and I invite Jesus to make me aware of his love and to come and live in my heart so He can enable me to be more like him. I'm trying to spend more time focusing on Jesus as a living person, learning to love him for who he is, and expressing gratitude for all the ways he shows his love by seeing that every good thing is a love gift from him. These practices are becoming more vital to my relationship with my living, loving Father than any head knowledge or "good busyness". Notice I said "practices" because it does take discipline to overcome all of the distractions competing for time and attention.

A recent devotion I read from a book by John Eldridge called Waking the Dead puts it like this:

"The heart is the connecting point, the meeting place between any two persons. The kind of deep soul intimacy we crave with God and with others can be experienced only from the heart...What more can be said, what greater case could be made than this: to find God you must look with all your heart. To remain present to God, you must remain present to your heart. To hear his voice, you must listen with your heart. To love him, you must love with all your heart. You cannot be the person God meant you to be, and you cannot live the life he meant you to live, unless you live from the heart."

### **WHAT'S INSIDE MATTERS. OUR HEARTS MATTER!**

~Written by Marilyn Whisner

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