

Watch your heart
Proverbs 4:23
Mount Carmel Christian Church
November 6, 2022

Bottom line: Scripture is clear that the heart of a person is the source of life.

It is a real delight for me to be with you today! I've really been looking forward to this because someone I trust a ton, loves this church a ton!

- I was privileged to connect deeply with your pastor over the course of several years and as a result I trust him deeply.
- This I know, the ones I know the best I come to trust the most!
- Isn't it the same for you? When you come to know a person's heart, you come to know the real person?
- That's when there's neither self-protection nor self promotion - they are fully transparent, authentic ... the real deal.
- That's how I see Didi Bacon - we have had an uncommonly deep connection - that's because we haven't gone just "head to head" but "heart to heart."

Who knows you well enough to know the true condition of your heart and soul?

- We're not talking about mere surface things, but the things that matter most to you, about the inner you - who you are at the core of you.
- Heart stuff is the most important stuff ... Proverbs 4:23 sums it up like this: **"Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life."** (ESV)

In their book, *Unhindered*, my friends Dr. John Walker and Dr. Charity Byers say, “*We can learn a lot from Scripture about the heart. The word heart is used 570 times in the NIV Bible, and it is most often used metaphorically to describe the inner self ... our true selves.*”

- I used to think that heart language was about *weaker* things, now I know it’s about *stronger* things. It’s really about the dominating desires of your life.
- It’s not about mere sentimentality but about energy and vitality.
- Brene Brown helped me to understand that it is strongly connected to courage.
- She called attention to the fact that at its core, courage is really about speaking all of one’s mind by sharing all of one’s heart.
- Needless to say, those sorts of conversations are both risky and rare.

Heart health is not accidental, its intentional. King David wrote in Psalm 138:3: “**When I called you answered me, you made me bold and stouthearted.**”

- Fundamentally it is God who is the essential source of our heart health and strength; but how does God actually increase our heart health and strength?
- He does that through the only two things that are eternal, His Word and His people!

No one can ever be heart healthy alone. We all need others to sharpen, encourage, resource and connect us.

- At times we even need others to strongly challenge us to listen to our hearts so that we can lead from our hearts.
- Just as many resist scheduling an annual physical exam, neither do most actually submit to anything resembling a spiritual exam.
- If feedback is the breakfast of champions they prefer to skip the breakfast as they once again rush into the day.

- Maybe it's because they don't want to receive an assessment or they don't know who to ask.

After speaking for a national conference I asked a resident scholar for his feedback on my messages.

- I was stunned by his candid insight when I asked: *"If God might be trying to get a message to me, through you, what might it be?"*
- He said, *"Yes, I do have something . . . **in the Bible heart and mind are frequently linked but heart almost always comes first.** You have a good/fleshy heart, listen to your heart!"*

Who talks like that? Well, if he had been some sort of new age guru I encountered on the street in Boulder, Colorado I would have easily dismissed him.

- But he wasn't rooted in the occult, rather he was steeped in the study of Scriptures from the original Greek!
- In addition, he had just listened to me preach, teach and converse over several hours.
- He had the credentials to get my attention and in that moment I knew what his message meant.
- I was grappling with some serious challenges at the time that he knew nothing about, yet his observation gave me the courage to live righteously and stay the course no matter what.

When facing giant challenges, do you tend to live and lead more with your head or with your heart?

- In a coaching call a good friend talked about his current leadership drains both with his staff and with the elders.
- The more he shared the more concerned I became. Oddly, by the end of the call I was more agitated than he was - and we were talking about his problems not mine!

That's when I asked him, "*Are you more of a head leader or a heart leader?*"

- He paused and admitted that in the face of troubling trends and leadership issues he tended to take more of a *head up* approach.
- That is, he rarely lost sleep over things because he just didn't let much bother him.
- Well, that led me to *bothering* him! I challenged him to share more of his heart with those in his leadership circle.
- Guess what? When he began to do that his leadership moved to a whole new level.

Do those closest to you know your heart?

- Do they know when you're dealing with deep disappointment?
- Do they know when you're feeling frustrated or hurt; overwhelmed or under supported?
- Do they know when you are feeling an inner compulsion or conviction; an unshakable passion or a sense of divine determination?

Those closest to us shouldn't have to guess about our feelings, especially in the face of daunting challenges.

- Candidly sharing our feelings doesn't mean erupting with anger, but at times it does require openly sharing our concerns and heartfelt convictions with passion.
- It's not excusing a lack of discretion, it's about the need for transparent congruence.
- There should always be a linkage between our head and our heart.
- We're called to have both the mind of Christ and also a heart of courage.
- Sometimes silence isn't golden, it's ungodly! Every godly leader knows that some situations require boldness.

Several weeks ago I was once again asked about this.

- A strong leader serving in Africa asked me to elaborate on the difference between those who are head strong and those who are heart strong, the difference between bravado and boldness.
- That's when the story of David and Goliath immediately came to mind, the way I see it, David had boldness, while Goliath had bravado.
- No one was willing to face the 9' 9" enemy of the living God in battle, not even King Saul, and Saul was the biggest man in Israel both in rank and stature.
- It wasn't until young David showed up that anyone was willing and able to speak up with the passion and confidence necessary to convince the king to allow him to represent the entire nation in one-on-one combat.
- You know how the story goes. As someone once said, while everyone else saw a giant too big to face, David saw a target too big to miss!

David challenged Goliath not just with his sling and a small stone but in the mighty name of the living God.

- David wasn't just *head strong*; David was *heart strong*.
- This is why God said, **"I have found David son of Jesse, a man after my own heart."** (Acts 13:22 NIV)

Are you more *head-strong* or *heart-strong*?

- It's an important question. In another coaching call I was asked to define the difference between head strong and heart strong.
- After fumbling around a moment, I suggested a *head strong leader* approaches challenges with a cocky attitude of *"I've got this!"*
- By contrast the *heart strong leader* lives and leads with the humble conviction, *"God's got this!"*

Bravado is *head up*; boldness is *heart up*. Bravado is haughty, boldness is humble.

- Goliath had bravado; David had boldness.
- David was incensed that a pagan bully was intimidating the people of God.
- David's response was not to join the majority who were cowering in fear, but to stand up with conviction that God would bring victory.
- Why? David knew that the victory would not be accomplished by him but rather by God *through* him. David was *heart strong!*

Even though we accept the reality of giant problems and know our inherent weakness to fix them, we also know that our God is bigger than any 9' 9" giant we will ever face.

- God is at work! The apostle Paul reminds us that the same power that raised Jesus from the dead is at work in those who believe!
- When you become convinced of that, you won't have much trouble convincing anyone else.
- Every time we grapple with something we go through a personal heart challenge. We have to ask ourselves, do I really believe what God has said, and if so, what am doing about it?

Heart work is hard work. No one should ever agree to lead anything unless they are willing to wrestle with matters of the heart.

- John Flavel once wrote: "The greatest difficulty in conversion is winning the heart to God and after to keep the heart with God. **Heart work is hard work indeed."** John Flavel
- It's why we begin most every session by checking in with a descriptive word or phrase followed with a personal declaration, "I'm all in!"

Here's just a sample of the sorts of things I and others have said:

- *I'm hopeful ... and I'm all in!*
- *I'm exhausted ... but I'm all in!*
- *I'm gratified ... and I'm all in!*
- *I'm defeated ... but I'm all in!*
- *I'm exploring ... and I'm all in!*
- *I'm frustrated ... but I'm all in!*
- *I'm ready ... and I'm all in!*
- *I'm confused ... but I'm all in!*
- *I'm anticipating... and I'm all in!*
- *I'm distracted ... but I'm trying to be all in!*
- *I'm thriving ... and I'm all in!*

Heart work involves bringing all of who you are with you in a conversation.

- There's an amazing passage in 2 Corinthians that speaks to the importance of this.
- The Apostle Paul writes: ***"We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians, and opened wide our hearts to you. We are not withholding our affections from you, but you are withholding yours from us. As a fair exchange, I speak as to my children - open wide your hearts also."*** 2 Corinthians 6:11-13
- I often finish a deep connection by saying: *"If this were the last conversation we ever had, is there anything else you need to hear from me or you need to say to me?"*
- That's not something that happens quickly in a crowded coffee shop.
- **Whole-hearted conversation requires a safe place, a safe person and an unhurried pace.**
- Frankly, that's sacred ground and that ground must be cultivated.
- Relationship like this are by definition rare ones because they demand the best of us all. They demand our hearts.

How long has it been since you experienced an unhurried, unhindered, whole-hearted connection with a trusted ally?

- For leaders this isn't just nice, it is necessary. It isn't just optional, it's essential.
- It isn't just to happen occasionally, it should happen frequently. This is the essence of your calling.
- After all, as Jonathan Edwards wrote: **“The first and greatest work of a Christian is about his heart.” Jonathan Edwards**

How healthy is your heart right now? It doesn't matter whether we lead a ministry in the church, a business enterprise or even your own family - sad stuff happens.

- What matters most is our heart condition. While most leadership books focus on topics related to strategy and skill, the most important and enlightening Book of all puts the emphasis first on heart and soul.
- **“And David shepherded them with integrity of heart; with skillful hands he led them.” (Psalm 78:72 NIV)**

The sequence is important. It's not coincidental that **heart comes before skill.**

- In my mentoring and coaching of leaders far and wide, I've learned that what most of them crave is not mere leadership tips but soul-enriching, heart-challenging conversations.
- We all need these to process the hits and hurts of life and leadership.

What we all know is that ministries and businesses don't crater primarily because of strategy mistakes, but because of self-centeredness and sin.

- As the prophet Jeremiah declared, **“The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?” (Jeremiah 17:9 NIV)**

- We see this confirmed every day with the news of national leaders crashing due to moral failure.
- It happens among the media elite, the top CEOs of business and sadly, even in the senior leadership of the church.
- The Body of Christ is inter-related. When one of us determines to live selfishly or sin grievous, all suffer some of the collateral damage.
- It's why I often say to those I trust, "*I have no secrets and it is well with my soul?*"
- Then I often ask this penetrating question of my closest colleagues. Only those who know us best would ever dare ask that question.
- So, who might you invite to *ask you* that question? Who might invite *you to ask* the same question?

Your life and mine will never be any richer than our relationships!

- The Christian life is never a solo affair. Our enemy wants to isolate us so that he can destroy us.
- God wants to connect us; so that He can enrich us!

Everyone has a series of circles of life, but social scientists say that there's a limit to the number that can really be close to us, and some people may migrate from one circle to the next over time.

- Who are the ones in your circle that are your friends *for life*? That is, your most *life-giving friends*?
- Picture it this way, as a series of circles - circles of life:

INSERT GRAPHICS HERE, PREFERABLY BUILDING FROM CENTER OUT - PLEASE CHANGE THE WORDS TO MATCH the circles!!!!

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/103ydxU-2WsqK5SZGb2x_mI7-dnQKaEJ0?usp=sharing

- 5 Close intimates
- 15 Close friends
- 50 Casual friends
- 150 Casual acquaintances

While all of these and more are in our circles *of life*; only the inner three circles might be called our friends “*for life*” i.e. “the most Life giving.”

- That’s not to dismiss the value of anyone but rather to recognize that we all have a limited amount of time and energy.
- The good news is that while we are called to love everyone we’re not called to be close to everyone!
- Those closest to us will always be the ones that have the most influence on us.

This I know, soul strength is contagious; we catch it from those we choose to be in deep, heart-felt community with us.

- Here’s the good news, you don’t need a lot of people in your life, you just need the right life giving people in your life.
- Everyone needs a relational oasis. So, who might you know that could join you on a soul-strengthening journey?
- You just need a few others, maybe even just one to start. The key will be a mutual desire not just to survive in life and leadership but to thrive!
- Life is messy, but it doesn’t have to be lonely.

Everyone needs close connections.

- Isn’t it interesting that when Jesus chose the twelve apostles, we’re told in **Mark 3:14 (NIV)**, He “**appointed twelve that they might be with him.**”

- The words *with him* have always jumped off the page for me. Jesus is reminding us all that it's not just a matter of what you do in life or where you go, but who it is that is doing things and going places with you!
- We seem to forget that Jesus lived on earth in community - He was in a small group!

Could it be that some of the most enriching friends you've ever had you have yet to cultivate?

- You may have yet to even meet some of them or perhaps you've known some of them for years but just on a surface level.
- Well, could it be that God might have greater plans for you than you can now envision!
- Here's an illustration of that for me. Early this year I gave away a lot of books... including one to my former college roommate.
- Bob is a good guy I've stayed in touch with over the years, mostly in a joking relationship ... and as former roommates we have a lot to joke about!
- He is a retired teacher and now part of very large church and co-teaching a strong Sunday school class.
- After I sent Bob a book he sent me a stunning text. He surprised me first with his determination to launch a soul circle with several other guys; secondly, when he was emotional about it!
- I had never seen or heard that from him. When I asked 'why' he explained that he envied the fact that his wife had close gal friends but that he had no close guy friends.
- While he had tons of "connections" he had no one who really knew him at his core.
- That all changed with "Soul Strength" - each of the four in his group shared at a level of depth that shocked themselves... sharing stories of pain that no one knew anything about.

- One described the experience as profound, all refer to it as life changing ... they now call themselves “soul allies.”

We all want to finish well, *more in love with Jesus at the end than at the beginning and more closely heart connected with others because of Him.*

- But that doesn't happen accidentally, that only happens intentionally and at times, even courageously!
- I just had lunch with one of my closest and most courageous friends, a true partner in my ministry of soul care.
- Steve is a big time business guy. He used to buy and sell businesses for a billionaire and now leads his own investment company in Boulder, Colorado.
- Steve has been key to the launch of this book and is endorsing it with his business buddies far and wide.
- Well, in our last lunch he could hardly wait to tell me how he has just seen God work in a business meeting back in Michigan that was rapidly going south.
- There was intense disagreement, anger and even hateful attitudes erupting and finally he had enough, that's when he pushed back from the table and “went pastor” on everyone!
- He said, “Listen, we are going to lose this business unless attitudes change right now. You must set hate aside and love each other - give one another the benefit of the doubt or everything will collapse.”
- Then he quoted something I had shared months prior in one of our lunches, a quote I found from Tim Keller, that Steve now uses as a daily prayer:
 - ***“Lord, save me from the sins of my tongue and the flaws of character that fuel them. Make my words honest, (by taking away my fear), few, (by taking away my self-importance), wise, (by taking away my thoughtlessness), kind, (by taking away my difference and irritability). Amen.” Tim Keller***

When he finished sharing the personal challenge and prayer, the atmosphere in the meeting totally changed and some were even in tears - many privately thanked him after, and asked for the prayer for themselves.

- And the company is headed in the right direction but more importantly some of those people are headed in the right direction with attitudes and interpersonal relationships.
- How did that happen? Not because Steve went “head to head” with 20 people in a business board room, but because Steve did the unexpected and courageous thing and went “heart to heart!”
- This I know, it’s not the big heady stuff for which you will be remembered and have the greatest personal impact - it’s not your resume, it’s your relational legacy ... your legacy of love.
- By God’s grace may you join with me in building life giving heart full relationships with those closest to you.
- Your life and mine will never be any richer than our *relationships!*
- God is madly in love with you and wants to be connected with you and wants you to be heart connected with others!
- Make no mistake **Soul strength is contagious, we catch it and keep it through those we choose to be in deep heart strong community with us!**