

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

HAMARTIOLOGY

The Doctrine of Sin

The Catastrophe from Which the Gospel Rescues Us

UNIT 5: TOTAL DEPRAVITY THE EXTENT OF THE FALL

Lesson 15

The Radical Corruption of the Heart Jeremiah 17:9 and the Depths of Human Self-Deception

Why the Heart That Is the Source of All Sin Is Also the Last to Know It

“The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?” — Jeremiah 17:9

*Key Texts: Jeremiah 17:9–10; Matthew 15:18–20; Mark 7:20–23; Proverbs 16:2; 21:2; Ezekiel 36:25–27;
Genesis 6:5*

“The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it? I, the Lord, search the heart, I test the mind, even to give to each man according to his ways, according to the results of his deeds.”

Jeremiah 17:9–10, NASB 1995

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Introduction

Lessons 13 and 14 have established the doctrines of total depravity and total inability as the comprehensive and constitutive condition of the unregenerate person. Every faculty has been corrupted (total depravity); the person is therefore unable to generate saving faith by her own natural resources (total inability); and the three biblical metaphors of death, slavery, and blindness establish that the rescue must come entirely from outside the person, as the sovereign, prior, creative work of God. This third lesson of Unit 5 descends deeper still, to the specific organ that both the Old and New Testaments identify as the root and source of the entire human problem: the heart.

Jeremiah 17:9 stands as the single most penetrating diagnosis of the human moral condition in all of Scripture: “The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?” (NASB 1995). The verse is remarkable for what it says and for what it implies. What it says is devastating: the heart is *aqov* (deceitful, cunning, like a supplanter who trips up the unwary) and *anush* (desperately sick, incurable by human means). What it implies is even more theologically significant: the heart deceives above all else, and the primary target of its deception is its own possessor. The person whose heart is more deceitful than all else is the person most likely to have the most distorted self-assessment available, to consistently underestimate the depth of her own corruption, the gravity of her own sin, and the absolute necessity of the sovereign grace that alone can address the incurable condition of the source from which all her sin flows.

This lesson examines the corrupt heart in five major sections. Section I establishes the biblical understanding of the heart as the center and source of the whole person in Hebrew and Greek anthropology, so that the diagnosis of Jeremiah 17:9 can be understood in its full scope. Section II develops the two characteristics of the corrupt heart in Jeremiah 17:9: its deceitfulness (*aqov*) and its incurable sickness (*anush*). Section III examines the heart as the source of all actual sin, drawing on Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 15:18–20 and Mark 7:20–23 and on the broader Proverbs tradition of the heart as the wellspring of all conduct. Section IV addresses the heart’s self-deception as a specifically pastoral challenge, examining how the consistent gap between the heart’s self-assessment and the Lord’s assessment (Proverbs 16:2; 21:2) shapes the practice of spiritual direction, self-examination, and pastoral care. Section V presents the New Covenant’s specific answer to the specific diagnosis: the promise of a new heart in Ezekiel 36:26 and its fulfillment in the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit. Section VI develops the pastoral and doxological implications of the entire lesson.

A word about the significance of this lesson in the structure of the unit. Lesson 13 (total depravity) and Lesson 14 (total inability) have approached the human problem from the angle of its consequences, what the fall’s corruption has done to the faculties, and what the resulting incapacity means for the question of salvation. This lesson approaches the same problem from the angle of its source, not what the corruption has done to the various faculties but where the corruption lives and from where it flows. The heart is the source; total depravity and total inability are the consequences of what flows from that source. Understanding the heart as the source is essential for understanding why behavioral modification cannot solve the problem (the behavior is the expression of the heart’s condition, not its cause), why education cannot solve the problem (the heart’s self-deception distorts the reception and application of every truth that education provides), and why the New Covenant’s provision of a new heart is the only theologically adequate answer to the full depth of the human moral problem.

The pastoral urgency of Jeremiah 17:9 is not merely theological. It is the urgency of the physician who knows that the disease is more serious than the patient has been told, indeed, more serious than the patient is capable of understanding without the specific illumination that the Spirit’s convicting work provides. The deceitful heart conceals its own condition from its possessor, making the external presentation of a person’s moral and spiritual situation consistently more favorable than the internal reality warrants. The pastor who knows Jeremiah 17:9 knows that she is ministering to persons whose self-assessment cannot be trusted as the primary guide to their actual spiritual condition, and who need, in addition to the faithful proclamation of the Word, the Spirit’s specific work of conviction that penetrates the heart’s self-deceiving defenses and brings the actual condition to light. This is the pastoral application of the theology: and it is one of the most important that the entire Hamartiology series generates.

I. The Heart in Biblical Anthropology

The Center and Source of the Whole Person

A. *The Hebrew Lev: The Whole Person in Its Moral Center*

The biblical concept of the heart cannot be understood through the lens of contemporary Western usage, which restricts the heart primarily to the emotional and affective dimensions of human experience. In Hebrew anthropology, the *lev* (heart) or *levav* is the center of the whole person, the integrated core from which thought, intention, desire, decision, and moral direction all flow. The heart in the Old Testament is the seat of intellectual activity: “The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (Genesis 6:5, NASB 1995), where the “intent of the thoughts of his heart” encompasses the entire cognitive and volitional life of the person. The heart is the seat of the will: the heart decides (Exodus 36:2), the heart refuses (Exodus 7:22–23), and the heart commits to a course of action (1 Chronicles 29:18). The heart is the seat of the affections: the first and greatest commandment calls for the love of God “with all your heart” (Deuteronomy 6:5), meaning with the entirety of one’s integrated personal center.

Proverbs 4:23 provides the most compact and comprehensive statement of the heart’s central role in the Old Testament anthropology: “Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life” (NASB 1995). The image of the heart as a spring from which the streams of life flow is the organizing metaphor for the entire Proverbs tradition’s concern with the cultivation of wisdom and the avoidance of foolishness: all conduct, every word spoken, every decision made, every relationship navigated, every moral choice exercised, flows from the heart as a spring. The vigilance commanded in verse 23 (“with all diligence”, literally, more than all keeping or guarding) corresponds to the centrality of what is being guarded: if the heart is the source from which all of life flows, then the corruption of the heart is the corruption of the source from which everything flows, and the vigilance required to maintain its integrity is proportional to the catastrophic consequences of its failure.

The theological implication of the heart’s central role in biblical anthropology is that Jeremiah 17:9’s diagnosis of the heart’s corruption is not a diagnosis of one faculty among others; it is a diagnosis of the source from which all faculties receive their direction and character. The corrupted heart of Jeremiah 17:9 does not merely produce corrupted emotions or corrupted decisions; it is the spring from which corrupted thought, corrupted will, corrupted affections, and corrupted moral judgment all flow. This is why total depravity, the comprehensive corruption of every faculty, is precisely what one would expect from the heart’s corruption: the spring has been poisoned, and every stream that flows from it carries the poison. And this is why the New Covenant’s answer to the diagnosis, a new heart, is the most radical and most comprehensive possible provision: replace the source, and the streams are renewed.

B. *The Greek Kardia: Continuity with the Hebrew Anthropology*

The Greek *kardia* in the New Testament carries the same comprehensive range of meaning as the Hebrew *lev*, and Jesus’ and Paul’s use of the term is continuous with the Old Testament’s anthropological understanding. The *kardia* is the seat of thought: “Jesus knowing their thoughts said, ‘Why are you thinking evil in your hearts?’” (Matthew 9:4, NASB 1995). It is the seat of intention and purpose: “He was a good man, and full of the Holy Spirit and of faith; and considerable numbers were brought to the Lord”, where the goodness of Barnabas is located in his being “a good man,” a description that would in biblical anthropology refer to his heart. It is the seat of moral understanding: “for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation” (Romans 10:10, NASB 1995). And it is the seat of the affections most fundamentally: “for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:21, NASB 1995), the heart follows its treasure, and the treasure reveals the heart.

Jesus’ own teaching establishes the heart as the specific locus of moral life and therefore of moral corruption in the most explicit and unambiguous terms. In Matthew 5:28, the adulterous gaze is traced to the heart (“whoever looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart”). In Matthew 6:21, material attachment is traced to the heart (“where your treasure is, there your heart will be also”). In Matthew

15:18–19, the full catalogue of human moral failure is traced to the heart: “But the things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and those defile the man. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders.” The comprehensive catalogue, thought, action, and speech, all traced to a single source: the heart. Jesus is not teaching that the heart influences behavior in some cases; He is teaching that the heart is the source of all behavior, good and bad, and that the corruption of the heart is the corruption of the source from which all behavioral expressions flow.

“Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life.”

Proverbs 4:23, NASB 1995

II. Jeremiah 17:9 and the Diagnosis of the Corrupt Heart

Deceitful Beyond All Else and Desperately Sick

A. *Aqov: The Deceitful, Supplanting Heart*

Jeremiah 17:9’s first adjective for the heart, *aqov*, carries a specific semantic range that the English “deceitful” captures only partially. The root *aqav* means to follow at the heel, to trip up, to supplant, and it is the root of the name Jacob (Ya’aqov), who was so named because he came from the womb holding his brother’s heel (Genesis 25:26) and who later earned the characterization as a deceiver and supplanter through his dealings with Esau and Laban. The *aqov* heart of Jeremiah 17:9 is therefore not merely dishonest in a general sense; it is specifically cunning, crafty, deceptively strategic, the kind of heart that appears to be other than what it is, that presents one face while concealing another, and that consistently outmaneuvers the attempts of its own possessor to know it accurately.

The specific direction of this deceitfulness is the most theologically significant feature of the verse: the heart deceives above all else, and the primary target of its deception is not other people but the person whose heart it is. Proverbs 16:2 states this principle with devastating directness: “All the ways of a man are clean in his own sight, but the Lord weighs the motives” (NASB 1995). The Hebrew word translated “motives” is *spirits* or *ruach*, but the point is the same: the Lord’s assessment of the heart’s actual condition and motivation penetrates behind and beneath the self-assessment that the deceitful heart consistently produces. The gap between “all the ways of a man are clean in his own sight” and “the Lord weighs the motives” is the measure of the heart’s self-deception: every person consistently overestimates the cleanness of her own ways, because the heart that is producing the self-assessment is the same heart whose cleanness is being assessed.

The self-deception of the *aqov* heart is not occasional dishonesty or the familiar experience of wishful thinking. It is the constitutive, systematic tendency of the fallen heart to produce in its possessor a self-assessment that is consistently more favorable than the divine assessment. This constitutive tendency is what makes the heart “more deceitful than all else”, not the most deceitful of all external things (though it may also be deceitful in its dealings with others) but more deceitful than all other things as a source of self-knowledge. No other source of self-deception, not the world, not the flesh, not the devil, is as consistently successful at producing a distorted self-assessment as the person’s own heart, precisely because it operates from the inside, with unlimited access to the self-assessment process, and with the specific advantage of being the organ that produces the self-assessment it is simultaneously distorting.

B. *Anush: The Incurably Sick Heart*

The second adjective in Jeremiah 17:9, *anush*, deepens the diagnosis from deception to incurability. The root *anash* is used throughout the Old Testament for conditions that are beyond ordinary human remedies: the incurable wound of Jeremiah 15:18 (“Why has my pain been perpetual and my wound incurable, refusing to be healed?”), the desperate condition of the prophesied Judah in Jeremiah 30:12 (“Your wound is incurable and your injury is serious”), and the hopeless state of Samaria in Micah 1:9 (“for her wound is incurable”). In each case,

anush describes a situation that is beyond the capacity of the ordinary remedies available in the fallen world to address.

Applied to the heart in Jeremiah 17:9, anush declares that the heart's condition is not merely very bad but beyond human remedy. The problem is not that the heart needs more education (the self-deception of the aqov heart distorts every educational input it receives). It is not that the heart needs better social conditions (the corruption of the source is prior to and independent of social circumstances). It is not that the heart needs stronger moral discipline (the heart's resistance to the law, as Paul develops in Romans 7, is precisely one of the symptoms of its anush condition rather than an obstacle that stronger effort can overcome). The heart needs what no human physician, no human teacher, no human reformer, and no human institution can provide: replacement by a sovereign act of the divine Physician who alone has the power to remove the incurable heart and replace it with a new one.

The sequence of the two adjectives in Jeremiah 17:9 is theologically instructive. Aqov (deceitful) comes first, and anush (incurably sick) follows. The deceitfulness of the heart is what prevents the person from accurately diagnosing its own anush condition: the heart that is most desperately in need of the divine Physician is precisely the heart that is most likely to deny the need, to minimize the symptoms, to produce in its possessor the conviction that the condition is not so bad, that human remedies are sufficient, that the urgency is not what the prophet declares it to be. The deceitfulness and the incurability reinforce each other: the heart is incurably sick, and it is constitutively deceptive about that incurability. This is why Jeremiah 17:9 is the most devastating diagnosis in the Old Testament, because it diagnoses not merely a condition but a condition that conceals itself from the one who needs most urgently to know it.

"The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it? I, the Lord, search the heart, I test the mind, even to give to each man according to his ways, according to the results of his deeds."

Jeremiah 17:9–10, NASB 1995

III. The Heart as the Source of All Sin

Jesus' Teaching in Matthew 15 and Mark 7

A. Out of the Heart Come Evil Thoughts: Matthew 15:18–20

Jesus' teaching in Matthew 15:18–20 provides the New Testament's most explicit development of Jeremiah 17:9's principle. In the context of a dispute with the Pharisees and scribes about ritual handwashing, Jesus shifts the moral conversation from the external (what goes into the mouth) to the internal (what comes out of the heart), establishing a principle that has the character of an axiom for the whole of New Testament ethics: "The things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and those defile the man. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders. These are the things which defile the man; but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile the man" (Matthew 15:18–20, NASB 1995).

The rhetorical structure of the teaching is carefully crafted. Jesus begins with the general principle (verse 18: what comes out of the mouth comes from the heart), then provides the specific evidence (verse 19: the catalogue of specific sins that come out of the heart), then draws the conclusion (verse 20: these are the defiling things, not unwashed hands). The catalogue of specific sins in verse 19 encompasses the full range of human sinfulness: thought (evil thoughts), action (murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts), and speech (false witness, slanders). Each category of sin is traced to the single source: the heart. Jesus is not saying that the heart influences behavior in some cases or is one causal factor among others; He is saying that the heart is the source from which all defiling conduct flows.

The theological implication of Jesus' teaching for the doctrine of total depravity is decisive. If every specific sin, every evil thought, every act of violence, every sexual transgression, every theft, every lie, every slander, proceeds

from the heart as its source, then the comprehensive corruption of every area of human life that total depravity describes is precisely what one would expect from a heart that is more deceitful than all else and desperately sick. The catalogue of sins in Matthew 15:19 is not a random assortment; it is a representative survey of the full range of human moral failure, and the attribution of each item in the survey to the heart establishes the heart's corruption as the comprehensive explanation for the comprehensive corruption that total depravity describes. The tree determines the fruit; the spring determines the water; the heart determines the life.

B. For Out of the Heart: Mark 7:20–23 and the Comprehensive Catalogue

The parallel passage in Mark 7:20–23 extends the specific catalogue of sins proceeding from the heart still further, providing the most comprehensive biblical list of the heart's sinful productions: "That which proceeds out of the man, that is what defiles the man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man" (Mark 7:20–23, NASB 1995). The Markan catalogue adds to Matthew's list: covetousness, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, pride, and foolishness. The list is not comprehensive in the sense of exhausting all possible sins, but it is comprehensive in the sense of covering the major categories of human moral failure across all the primary areas of the person's life.

The phrase "from within, out of the heart of men" (ek tēs kardias tōn anthrōpōn) in verse 21 is the most explicit possible statement of the heart's role as the source of all defilement. The "from within" is first, establishing that the source is internal, not external. The "out of the heart" is specific, identifying the particular internal organ from which the outflow comes. And the "of men" is universal, not the hearts of especially wicked people but the hearts of human beings as such, men in their generic humanity. Jesus is not describing the condition of the especially corrupt; He is describing the condition of the human heart as such in its post-fall reality. The inclusion of "foolishness" (aphrosunē) at the end of the catalogue is significant: foolishness in biblical wisdom literature is not merely intellectual obtuseness but the constitutive moral failure of the person who lives as though God's authority and claims are not the most significant realities of existence, the practical expression of the self-deception that Jeremiah 17:9's *aqov* heart produces.

The pastoral implication of Jesus' teaching in Matthew 15 and Mark 7 is that the primary target of pastoral care is the heart, not the behavior. The behavioral symptoms of sin, the evil thoughts, the adulteries, the thefts, the slanders, are the expressions of the heart's condition, not its cause. A pastoral approach that addresses only the behavioral symptoms without attending to the heart's condition is treating the smoke while ignoring the fire, managing the outflow while ignoring the spring. This is not to say that behavioral accountability and specific counsel about specific sins are unimportant; they are essential components of faithful pastoral care. But they are only adequate insofar as they are grounded in and directed toward the deeper work of the Spirit in the heart, the work that alone can renew the source from which the specific behavioral symptoms flow.

IV. The Heart's Self-Deception as a Pastoral Challenge

Who Can Understand It? The Lord Searches the Heart

A. Proverbs 16:2 and 21:2: The Gap Between Self-Assessment and Divine Assessment

Jeremiah 17:9's rhetorical question, "who can understand it?", is the most theologically searching question in the verse, and it points directly to the most challenging pastoral implication of the doctrine of the corrupt heart. The person whose heart is more deceitful than all else cannot understand her own heart accurately, because the instrument of self-understanding (the heart) is the very thing whose accuracy is in question. This is not a recoverable epistemological problem that careful introspection or philosophical self-analysis can solve; it is a constitutive incapacity built into the structure of the fallen self's self-knowledge. The heart's self-deception is not an occasional error that occasional honest self-examination can correct; it is the systematic, constitutive tendency of the fallen heart to produce in its possessor a consistently more favorable self-assessment than the actual condition warrants.

Proverbs 16:2 and 21:2 provide the wisdom tradition's development of this principle. Proverbs 16:2: "All the ways of a man are clean in his own sight, but the Lord weighs the motives." Proverbs 21:2: "Every man's way is right in his own eyes, but the Lord weighs the hearts." Both verses follow the same two-part structure: the person's self-assessment (all ways clean, every way right) followed by the divine assessment (the Lord weighs the motives, the Lord weighs the hearts). The juxtaposition is stark and deliberate: the person who assesses her ways as clean and right is the same person whose motives the Lord weighs and finds to be other than she has assessed them. The gap between the self-assessment and the divine assessment is not a minor discrepancy that could be corrected by more careful introspection; it is the constitutive gap between the deceitful heart's self-presentation and the God's penetrating perception of the actual condition.

The pastoral challenge that this gap creates is immense. The pastor is ministering to persons whose primary source of self-knowledge, their own hearts, is constitutively unreliable in the direction of self-flattery. The counselee who presents himself as more righteous, more sincere, more spiritually healthy than the actual condition warrants is not necessarily being deliberately dishonest; he may genuinely believe the self-assessment his deceitful heart is producing. The Pharisee of Luke 18:11–12 who thanks God that he is not like other men is not engaging in calculated hypocrisy; he genuinely sees his own ways as clean in his own sight, even while the tax collector's honest cry, "God, be merciful to me, the sinner!", reflects the heart-knowledge that only the Spirit's convicting work can produce. The pastor who understands Jeremiah 17:9 is the pastor who is not surprised by the consistent gap between self-presentation and actual condition, who does not simply accept self-reports at face value as the primary basis for pastoral assessment, and who knows that the Spirit's convicting work is essential for the kind of honest self-knowledge that genuine repentance requires.

B. *The Lord Searches the Heart: The Only Reliable Assessment*

Jeremiah 17:10 provides the answer to the question of verse 9 ("who can understand it?"): "I, the Lord, search the heart, I test the mind, even to give to each man according to his ways, according to the results of his deeds." The divine self-assertion is unmistakable: the Lord who searches the heart and tests the mind is the only assessor whose assessment is reliable, precisely because He is not subject to the self-deception that corrupts every human heart's self-assessment. He sees behind the presentation to the actual condition; He perceives the motives that Proverbs 16:2 says He weighs; He knows the heart that the rhetorical question of 17:9 declares incomprehensible to its own possessor.

The theological grounding of the Lord's heart-searching capacity is His omniscience. The God who knows all things knows the heart as it actually is, not as it presents itself to its own possessor or to the observation of others. David's great prayer in Psalm 139:1–6 develops this with unforgettable personal force: "O Lord, You have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; You understand my thought from afar. You scrutinize my path and my lying down, and are intimately acquainted with all my ways. Even before there is a word on my tongue, behold, O Lord, You know it all." The comprehensive divine knowledge of the person, sitting, rising, thinking, walking, lying down, speaking, is the divine knowledge of the heart from which all of these activities flow. And it is the basis for the concluding prayer of Psalm 139:23–24 that constitutes the honest person's response to Jeremiah 17:9's diagnosis: "Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me and know my anxious thoughts; and see if there be any hurtful way in me, and lead me in the everlasting way." The prayer is the request for the divine heart-searching that alone can penetrate the self-deception the person's own heart is producing.

This prayer, "Search me, O God, and know my heart", is the specific pastoral provision that the doctrine of the corrupt heart demands. It is the prayer of the person who has understood Jeremiah 17:9 well enough to know that she cannot trust her own heart's report about her own heart's condition, and who therefore appeals to the only Assessor whose assessment is reliable. It is the prayer that should be prayed at the beginning of every serious act of self-examination, every confession, every pastoral conversation, and every act of corporate worship: Lord, You know what I do not know about myself; show me what You see, convict me of what You find, and lead me in the way that my own heart's deception would conceal from me. This is the spiritually humble, Jeremiah-17:9-informed posture that genuine spiritual growth requires.

“Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me and know my anxious thoughts; and see if there be any hurtful way in me, and lead me in the everlasting way.”

Psalm 139:23–24, NASB 1995

V. The New Covenant’s Answer to the Corrupt Heart

Ezekiel 36:26 and the Promise of a New Heart

A. *I Will Remove the Heart of Stone: The Radical Nature of the Provision*

The Old Testament’s most theologically specific answer to Jeremiah 17:9’s diagnosis of the corrupt heart is the New Covenant’s promise of Ezekiel 36:26: “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh” (NASB 1995). The verse is remarkable for the radicality of its provision: not the improvement of the existing heart, not its reformation or its education, but its removal and replacement. The anush heart of Jeremiah 17:9 cannot be improved because it is incurably diseased; it must be replaced. And Ezekiel 36:26 declares that the replacement is precisely what God promises to do in the New Covenant.

The contrast between the heart of stone and the heart of flesh is not a contrast between hardness and softness in an emotional or psychological sense. In biblical usage, the heart of stone (*lev ha-even*) is the insensate, unresponsive, spiritually dead heart, the heart that cannot feel the weight of God’s claims, cannot respond to the Spirit’s conviction, cannot receive the law’s instruction or the gospel’s invitation with genuine spiritual understanding. The heart of flesh (*lev basar*) is the living, responsive, spiritually awake heart, not the heart of mere emotion or sentimentality, but the heart of genuine spiritual life: the capacity for genuine love of God, genuine reception of His Word, and genuine obedience from within rather than compliance under external pressure. The contrast is not one of degree but of kind: the stony heart cannot do what the fleshly heart does, any more than a stone can do what a living organ does.

The specifically divine character of the provision is emphasized by every verb in Ezekiel 36:26: “I will give”, God gives the new heart, not the person generates it. “I will put”, God puts the new spirit within, not the person cultivates it. “I will remove”, God removes the heart of stone, not the person gradually softens it. “I will give you a heart of flesh”, God gives the living heart, not the person develops it through religious effort. Every verb is first-person singular divine, establishing that the provision of the new heart is a sovereign monergistic act of the God who promises it, precisely the kind of act that the anush condition of Jeremiah 17:9 demands and that the New Covenant’s provisions are designed to supply.

B. *The Fulfillment in the New Testament: Regeneration as Heart Transplant*

The promise of Ezekiel 36:26 is fulfilled in the New Testament in the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit. The new birth of John 3:3–8, the making-alive of Ephesians 2:5, and the new creation of 2 Corinthians 5:17 are all New Testament expressions of the same reality that Ezekiel 36:26 promises in the language of the new heart: the sovereign, divine replacement of the old nature with a genuinely new one. The fulfillment is not a gradual improvement of the old heart through progressive sanctification, that is the subsequent work of the Spirit in the regenerate person, but a definitive, instantaneous, sovereign act of the Spirit that creates the new heart in the moment of regeneration, just as Ezekiel’s promise is a single divine act rather than a gradual process.

The connection between the Spirit’s giving of the new heart and the Spirit’s presence in the believer is explicit in Ezekiel 36:27: “I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances” (NASB 1995). The same divine act that gives the new heart also gives the Spirit who indwells the new heart and empowers its operation. This establishes the indissoluble connection between regeneration (the giving of the new heart) and the Spirit’s indwelling presence (the One who empowers the new heart’s response). The new heart is not merely a new capacity that the person then exercises on her own

resources; it is the new capacity that the indwelling Spirit empowers and directs in its response to God's Word and claims.

The Jeremiah-to-Ezekiel-to-New-Testament theological trajectory is one of the most illuminating movements in the entire Old Testament's witness to the gospel: Jeremiah 17:9 diagnoses the heart's corruption as *aqov* and *anush*, deceitful and incurably diseased. Jeremiah 31:31–34 promises a New Covenant in which the law will be written on the heart rather than on stone tablets, addressing the *anush* condition by the internalization of the law that the corrupt heart could never adequately receive. Ezekiel 36:26 specifies the mechanism of the New Covenant's provision: not merely the writing of the law on the existing heart but the replacement of the existing heart with a new one. And the New Testament declares the fulfillment in the Spirit's regenerating work: the same Spirit who inspired the prophetic word now fulfills the prophetic promise, giving to every believer the new heart that Ezekiel promised and the new birth that Jesus declared necessary. The Old Testament's most devastating diagnosis (Jeremiah 17:9) has found its most comprehensive answer in the New Covenant's most radical provision (Ezekiel 36:26, fulfilled in John 3:3–8).

VI. Pastoral and Doxological Implications

The Heart's Corruption and the Gospel's Radical Provision

A. *The Pastoral Practice of Spiritual Direction Under Jeremiah 17:9*

The doctrine of the corrupt heart, fully understood in its Jeremiah-17:9 dimensions, radically reconfigures the practice of pastoral care and spiritual direction. The pastor who takes seriously the teaching that the heart is more deceitful than all else will not accept self-reports at face value as the primary data for pastoral assessment. She will listen carefully to what the counselee says, but she will listen with the awareness that the counselee's self-assessment is being generated by the same heart whose condition is in question. The pastor will be the observer who notices what the counselee does not notice, the patterns of self-justification, the consistent favorable self-construction, the ways in which the counselee's account of her own situation places her consistently in the most sympathetic light and her antagonists in the least sympathetic. These patterns are not evidence of deliberate dishonesty; they are evidence of the *aqov* heart's constitutive tendency to produce in its possessor a distorted self-assessment.

The specific pastoral tool that Jeremiah 17:9 demands is the steady, Spirit-dependent, prayer-soaked engagement with the Word of God as the one external instrument that can penetrate the heart's self-deception. Hebrews 4:12 provides the New Testament's most direct statement of the Word's capacity to address the heart's condition: "For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart." The Word judges the thoughts and intentions of the heart, precisely the organ that Jeremiah 17:9 declares incomprehensible to its own possessor. The Word penetrates where self-examination cannot reach and surfaces what the self-deceiving heart has concealed. This is why faithful, expository preaching, the sustained, systematic application of the full counsel of God to the full range of human experience, is the most powerful instrument of spiritual formation available to the church: it is the specific tool designed by the divine Author for the specific task of penetrating the deceptions of the deceitful heart.

B. *The Doxological Terminus: The New Heart as the Gift of Sovereign Grace*

The doxological implication of the Jeremiah-17:9-to-Ezekiel-36:26 trajectory is the specific, personal, wonder-producing recognition that the new heart the believer now possesses was not generated by her own moral effort, not earned by her own religious achievement, not cultivated by her own spiritual discipline, but given, freely, sovereignly, unilaterally, by the God who said "I will give you a new heart." Every verb in Ezekiel 36:26 is divine. The new heart is God's gift; the new spirit is God's gift; the removal of the stony heart is God's act; the giving of the fleshly heart is God's provision. The person who now desires God, loves God, seeks God, responds to the gospel, and grows in progressive conformity to the image of Christ is not doing so because she has managed to

reform her aqov and anush heart by her own efforts; she is doing so because the God who promised to give a new heart has kept His promise in her specific case.

This specific, personal, covenant-keeping divine act is the deepest possible source of the believer's assurance of salvation, because it grounds the assurance not in the current quality of the believer's performance but in the sovereign faithfulness of the God who gave the new heart. The new heart's desires, loves, and responses are genuine evidence of regeneration, but they are not the ultimate ground of assurance; the ultimate ground is the God who said "I will give you a new heart" and who does not revoke His gifts or recall His promises. The person who is concerned about the inconsistency of her own desires, the wavering of her own love, and the failures of her own obedience is directed not to her own performance but to the God who gave the new heart precisely because the old one was aqov and anush, who knew the diagnosis before the provision was made and who made the provision as the radical answer to a diagnosis that no human effort could address.

The doxological response to the new heart is the response of the person who has understood what was wrong with the old one. The Psalm 139:23–24 prayer, "Search me, O God, and know my heart", is the prayer of the person who knows enough about Jeremiah 17:9 to know that her own self-assessment cannot be trusted and who has learned to bring the unreliable self-report of her deceitful heart to the only Assessor whose assessment is reliable. And the doxological joy of Ezekiel 36:26's fulfillment, "I will give you a new heart", is the joy of the person who has received the radical, sovereign, unilateral provision of the God who addressed the incurable diagnosis with the only possible remedy: a new heart, a new spirit, and the indwelling of the divine Spirit who empowers the new heart's response to the God who gave it. This is the gospel's specific word to the person who has heard Jeremiah 17:9 and who knows that the description is accurate: the incurable has been given a cure that no human hand could provide, and the deceitful has been given the transparent love for God that only the new heart, given by the God who promised it, can produce. Soli Deo Gloria.

"I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances."

Ezekiel 36:26–27, NASB 1995

Theological Terms and Definitions

Term	Definition
The Heart (Lev / Kardia)	In biblical anthropology, the heart (Hebrew lev or levav; Greek kardia) is not primarily the seat of emotion, as in modern Western usage, but the center and source of the whole person, the integrated core from which thought, intention, desire, decision, and moral direction all flow. Proverbs 4:23 captures this comprehensive understanding: “Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life.” The heart in Scripture is the seat of the intellect (“The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God,’” Psalm 14:1), the will (“I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it,” Jeremiah 31:33), the affections (“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart,” Matthew 22:37), and the conscience (“For God is greater than our heart and knows all things,” 1 John 3:20). The heart’s corruption in the fall is therefore not a compartmentalized problem affecting one area of the person; it is the corruption of the very center from which every dimension of human life flows. When Jeremiah declares the heart more deceitful than all else (17:9), he is declaring that the fall has corrupted the very source of human existence.
Aqov (עָקַב), Deceitfulness	The Hebrew adjective used in Jeremiah 17:9 to describe the heart, translated “deceitful” in the NASB 1995. The word aqov is related to the verb aqav (to follow at the heel, to trip up, to supplant) and to the name Jacob (Ya’aqov), who was so named because he came from the womb holding his brother’s heel (Genesis 25:26) and later supplanted Esau twice through cunning (Genesis 25:29–34; 27:1–40). The aqov heart of Jeremiah 17:9 is therefore a heart that trips up, supplants, deceives, and acts with cunning, not primarily in its dealings with others (though this is included) but in its dealings with its own possessor. The heart deceives the person who has it, producing consistently distorted self-assessments, systematically favorable self-judgments, and the persistent illusion that one’s own condition and motivations are better than they actually are. This self-deceiving character of the heart is the specific dimension of its corruption that Proverbs 16:2 and 21:2 develop: “Every man’s way is right in his own eyes, but the Lord weighs the hearts.”
Anush (אָנֹשׁ), Desperately Sick	The Hebrew adjective used alongside aqov in Jeremiah 17:9 to describe the heart, translated “desperate sick” or “desperately wicked” (KJV) in various English versions. The root anash describes a condition that is incurable, beyond remedy by ordinary human means, or extremely ill. It appears elsewhere in the Old Testament in descriptions of physical conditions that are beyond medical treatment (Job 34:6; Jeremiah 15:18; Micah 1:9) and of social or political conditions that are irremediable (Isaiah 17:11; Jeremiah 30:12). The specific force of anush in Jeremiah 17:9 is the declaration that the heart’s condition is not merely bad but incurable by human means, that the problem is not susceptible to the remedies that human wisdom or human religious effort can provide. The heart does not merely need improvement, reformation, or better moral education; it needs replacement. This is the precise linguistic basis for the New Covenant’s promise of a “new heart” (Ezekiel 36:26) as the specific, radical divine answer to the anush condition of the old one.
Self-Deception	The specific form of deception that Jeremiah 17:9 identifies as the heart’s primary characteristic: the deception of its own possessor. Self-deception in the biblical sense is not merely occasional error or honest self-misunderstanding; it is the systematic, constitutive tendency of the fallen heart to produce in the person who has it a consistently favorable assessment of her own moral and spiritual condition that does not correspond to the divine assessment of that condition. Proverbs 16:2 (“All the ways of a man are clean in his own sight, but the Lord weighs the motives”, NASB 1995) and 21:2 (“Every man’s way is right in his own eyes, but the Lord weighs the hearts”) establish self-deception as the universal human moral epistemological condition: not one person’s idiosyncrasy but the characteristic of every fallen heart. The gap between the self-assessment and the divine assessment is the measure of the heart’s self-deception, and the Lord’s weighing of the heart is the sovereign act by which the deception is penetrated and the truth is known.

Term	Definition
The New Heart (Ezekiel 36:26)	The specific promise of the New Covenant as it addresses the anush condition of the heart described in Jeremiah 17:9: “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh” (Ezekiel 36:26, NASB 1995). The new heart is the specific divine answer to the specific diagnosis of the old heart’s incurability: because the old heart cannot be reformed (it is anush, beyond ordinary remedy), it must be replaced. The replacement is a divine act, God will give the new heart, not the person will generate it or earn it, and it is the soteriological fulfillment of the New Covenant promise whose full realization comes in the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit. The contrast between the heart of stone (insensate, unresponsive to God’s claims) and the heart of flesh (living, responsive, capable of genuine love for God) is the Ezekielian way of describing the same transformation that John 3 calls the new birth and that Paul calls being made alive together with Christ (Ephesians 2:5). The new heart is not merely an improved old heart; it is a new creation.
The Wellspring of the Heart (Proverbs 4:23)	Solomon’s instruction in Proverbs 4:23, “Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life” (NASB 1995), establishes the central principle of biblical anthropology regarding the heart: the heart is not merely one faculty among others but the spring or source from which the entire stream of a person’s life flows. All conduct, all speech, all thought, all desire originates in the heart. This principle gives Jeremiah 17:9’s diagnosis its full weight: if the heart is the source of all life, and the heart is more deceitful than all else and desperately sick, then the corruption of the heart is the corruption of the source from which all of life flows. The problem is not merely behavioral (bad fruit can be cut off the branch) but constitutional (the tree itself is diseased). Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 15:18–20 and Mark 7:20–23 develops this principle with explicit precision: “the things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and those defile the man.” Sin is not primarily an external problem that education, environment, or behavioral modification can address; it is an internal condition that only a new heart can remedy.
Inner Defilement (Mark 7:14–23)	Jesus’ teaching in Mark 7:14–23 is the most comprehensive New Testament development of Jeremiah 17:9’s principle of the heart as the source of all defilement. In the context of a dispute about ritual purity, Jesus establishes the decisive principle: “There is nothing outside the man which can defile him if it goes into him; but the things which proceed out of the man are what defile the man” (Mark 7:15, NASB 1995). The specific catalogue of defiling things that proceed from within in verses 21–22, evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, and foolishness, encompasses the full range of human sin in its most explicit form. Jesus’ point is not merely that external behavior reflects internal character (a truism that most people would acknowledge) but that the internal condition is prior and causative: sin is not produced by external circumstances and occasions but by the corruption of the heart that is present before any external occasion arises.
Self-Justification (Romans 10:3)	The specific expression of the heart’s self-deception in the realm of moral and spiritual self-assessment: the tendency of the fallen heart to establish its own righteousness rather than submitting to the righteousness of God. Paul describes this specifically in Romans 10:3, “For not knowing about God’s righteousness and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God”, as the characteristic failure of Israel’s relationship to the law, and by extension as the characteristic posture of every unregenerate person who brings to the divine tribunal a self-assessment that is, by the testimony of Jeremiah 17:9, systematically distorted in the person’s own favor. Self-justification is the practical expression of the heart’s self-deception: the person whose heart is more deceitful than all else will consistently find, in the court of her own moral self-assessment, that she is more righteous than the divine assessment reveals her to be. The gospel specifically addresses self-justification by providing the righteousness of God (Romans 1:17; 3:21–22) as the only

Term	Definition
	adequate substitute for the self-generated righteousness that the self-deceiving heart perpetually but futilely attempts to establish.
The Lord Weighs the Heart (Proverbs 21:2)	The recurring Proverbs motif of the Lord's weighing of the heart (Proverbs 16:2; 21:2; 24:12) is the specific divine answer to the self-deception that Jeremiah 17:9 describes. Because the heart deceives its own possessor, the person's self-assessment is consistently unreliable as a guide to the actual moral condition. The Lord's weighing of the heart is the penetrating divine assessment that reaches behind and beneath the self-flattering self-assessment to the actual condition of the moral center, the assessment that Romans 2:16 describes as the judgment of "the secrets of men." The weighing-of-the-heart motif has profound pastoral implications: it means that the pastoral conversation is not primarily a matter of accepting the counselee's self-assessment at face value but of discerning, with the Spirit's help, the actual condition of the heart that the self-assessment may be concealing. And it provides the specific motivation for the honest self-examination that Psalm 139:23–24's prayer requests: "Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me and know my anxious thoughts; and see if there be any hurtful way in me, and lead me in the everlasting way."
The Heart Transplant (Regeneration)	The theological description of regeneration that the imagery of Ezekiel 36:26 most naturally suggests: not merely the improvement of the old heart but the replacement of it with a new one. The heart transplant metaphor captures several dimensions of the doctrine of regeneration that other metaphors (such as new birth or spiritual resurrection) do not foreground as directly. First, the complete replacement of the defective organ: the new heart is not a repaired version of the old one but a genuinely new creation, just as a transplanted heart is a different heart from the one it replaced. Second, the passive reception of the new organ: the patient does not perform the transplant on herself but receives it from the surgeon. Third, the new life that the new heart enables: just as a successful transplant gives the patient a new capacity for physical life and activity that the diseased heart could not produce, the regenerate person's new heart gives her a new capacity for spiritual life, genuine love for God, genuine desire for obedience, genuine receptivity to the gospel, that the old heart could not generate. The heart transplant metaphor is the specific soteriological provision that corresponds precisely to the specific diagnosis of Jeremiah 17:9: the incurable (anush) old heart is replaced, not reformed.

Practical Application

A. *For the Mind: What Must We Believe?*

We must believe that the heart, in the biblical sense, is the center and source of the whole person, not merely the seat of emotion or religious feeling, but the integrated core from which thought, will, desire, decision, and moral direction all flow, and that the corruption of the heart described in Jeremiah 17:9 is therefore the corruption of the source from which all of life proceeds. This conviction changes the entire frame through which we understand the human moral problem and its solution: the problem is not behavioral (bad fruit that can be cut from the branch) but constitutional (the tree itself is diseased at its root), and the solution must be correspondingly radical (not reformation of the existing tree but the creation of a new one, through the sovereign work of the Spirit who gives the new heart that Ezekiel 36:26 promises).

We must also believe the specific pastoral epistemology that Jeremiah 17:9 demands: that the heart's self-assessment is constitutively unreliable in the direction of self-flattery, that the gap between "all the ways of a man are clean in his own sight" (Proverbs 16:2) and "the Lord weighs the motives" is the measure of every person's self-deception, and that the only reliable assessment of the heart is the divine assessment that the Lord's searching of the heart and testing of the mind provides. This conviction creates a specific posture in pastoral ministry: neither the uncritical acceptance of self-reports at face value nor the cynical dismissal of all self-presentation, but the humble, Spirit-dependent, Word-grounded engagement with the person that holds the self-report in appropriate suspicion and looks to the Lord's assessment as the only reliable guide to the actual condition.

B. *For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?*

The doctrine of the corrupt heart should produce in the believing person a specific and searching humility, the humility of one who knows that her primary source of self-knowledge is constitutively unreliable and who therefore cannot trust her own assessment of her own spiritual condition as the final word. This humility is not morbid self-loathing or the paralyzing uncertainty of one who cannot know anything about her own condition; it is the honest, Spirit-illuminated, Word-grounded humility of one who has learned to bring her self-assessment to the divine assessment and to receive correction without defensiveness when the Lord's searching reveals what her own heart has been concealing. The Psalm 139:23–24 prayer is the specific posture this humility takes: "Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me and know my anxious thoughts; and see if there be any hurtful way in me, and lead me in the everlasting way."

Desire, above all, the new heart that Ezekiel 36:26 promises, not as a theological concept to be affirmed but as a daily experiential reality to be inhabited. The new heart is not a spiritual achievement to be attained through sustained effort; it is the gift of the God who promised it and the work of the Spirit who implements it. But it is a gift that must be actively received, a work that must be actively cooperated with, and a new capacity for love, desire, and obedience that must be actively exercised through the means of grace that the Spirit employs. The desire for the new heart is itself the evidence that the Spirit has been at work; the possession of the new heart is the basis for the ongoing desire that it produces; and the growing fruitfulness of the new heart's loves and desires is the progressive fulfillment of the divine promise: "I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes."

C. *For the Hands: What Must We Do?*

- Read Jeremiah 17:5–10 in its full literary context, the contrast between the one who trusts in human strength (and is like a shrub in the desert, verse 6) and the one who trusts in the Lord (and is like a tree planted by water, verse 8). Note that the diagnosis of the corrupt heart in verse 9 comes in the context of this contrast, immediately following the description of the person who trusts in the Lord. The implication is that even the person who genuinely trusts in the Lord needs the divine heart-searching of verse 10, that the corrupt heart is not merely the condition of the obviously irreligious but the condition from which even the faithful are not exempt in their remaining corruption. Apply this to your own self-assessment: in what

specific ways does your heart produce a more favorable assessment of your trust in the Lord than the Lord's actual assessment of your heart would corroborate?

- Commit Psalm 139:23–24 to memory and make it the regular prayer with which you begin every significant act of self-examination, every serious pastoral conversation, and every act of corporate confession. The prayer is the specific posture that Jeremiah 17:9 requires: the humble acknowledgment that your heart's self-assessment cannot be trusted and the active invitation to the only Assessor whose assessment is reliable. The prayer does not guarantee that you will immediately see what the Lord sees, the Spirit's convicting and illuminating work operates on His schedule, not yours, but it establishes the posture of receptivity that the Spirit's illuminating work requires: openness to correction, willingness to receive what the heart's self-deception has been concealing, and the specific trust in the divine Assessor that the *aqov* heart consistently seeks to avoid.
- Study Jesus' teaching in Matthew 15:18–20 and Mark 7:20–23 as a heart examination. Take each category of sin in Jesus' catalogue, evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness, and ask: in what specific form does this specific sin currently express itself in my own life? Not the obvious, dramatic form (you may not be a murderer in the literal sense) but the heart form that Jesus' exposition of the law in Matthew 5 establishes as equally real: the unrighteous anger that is murder in the heart, the lustful gaze that is adultery in the heart, the withholding of what is due that is theft in the heart. The heart examination that Jesus' teaching in Matthew 15 and Mark 7 requires is not an examination of behavior but of the heart from which behavior flows.
- Practice the pastoral discipline of listening to self-reports with what might be called "Jeremiah 17:9 ears", attentive to what the person says but alert to the gap between the self-assessment and the likely actual condition. In your next pastoral conversation with a counselee who is discussing their own spiritual life, relationships, or patterns of sin, attend carefully to the consistent direction of the self-assessment: does the person consistently place herself in the most favorable light? Does she consistently attribute the problems in her relationships to the failures of others more than to her own? Does the spiritual self-report consistently identify progress and growth while minimizing struggle and failure? Each of these patterns is the *aqov* heart's characteristic self-presentation, and the pastor who recognizes it is the pastor who can gently and specifically invite the counselee to the Lord's assessment that Proverbs 16:2 and 21:2 identify as the only reliable alternative.
- Meditate on the two-part structure of Ezekiel 36:26–27 as the specific provision of the New Covenant for the specific problem of Jeremiah 17:9. The new heart (verse 26) addresses the *aqov* condition: a heart that is no longer constitutively self-deceptive because it has been renewed at its source, given a new orientation toward God and toward truth that the old stony heart could not produce. The indwelling Spirit (verse 27) addresses the *anush* condition: the incurable disease of the old heart is not merely replaced by a healthy new heart left to function on its own resources; the new heart is indwelt and empowered by the divine Spirit who "causes you to walk in My statutes." The completeness of the provision corresponds to the comprehensiveness of the problem: *aqov* and *anush*, deceitful and incurable, are answered by a new heart that is neither and by a divine Presence who empowers the new heart's response to the God who gave it.

Key Texts: *Jeremiah 17:9–10; Matthew 15:18–20; Mark 7:20–23; Proverbs 4:23; 16:2; 21:2; Ezekiel 36:26–27; Psalm 139:23–24; Hebrews 4:12; Genesis 6:5; Luke 18:11–14; Romans 10:3*

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

1. Before studying this lesson, how did you understand the relationship between the biblical concept of the heart and the modern Western concept of the heart as primarily the seat of emotion? How has the lesson's development of the biblical heart as the center and source of the whole person, the seat of intellect, will, affections, and conscience, changed the weight and scope of Jeremiah 17:9's diagnosis for you? And in what specific way does the heart's role as the source from which all of life flows make the corrupt heart's diagnosis more serious than a diagnosis of any single faculty would be?

Observation Questions (What Do the Texts Say?)

2. Read Jeremiah 17:9–10 carefully and analyze each element of the verse. What are the two Hebrew adjectives used to describe the heart in verse 9, and what is the specific semantic range of each? What is the rhetorical question at the end of verse 9 (“who can understand it?”) and what does it establish about the relationship between the heart and its possessor's self-knowledge? Then read verse 10 and identify who answers the question of verse 9, and what the divine claim to heart-knowledge in verse 10 adds to the diagnosis of verse 9.
3. Read Matthew 15:10–20 and Mark 7:14–23 side by side. What is the specific context that prompts Jesus' teaching about the heart as the source of defilement? How does Jesus use the contrast between what goes into the mouth (external) and what comes out of the mouth/heart (internal) to establish his point? Comparing the two catalogues of sins that come from the heart in Matthew 15:19 and Mark 7:21–22, what categories of sin are common to both, and what does Mark's more extensive list add? And what does the phrase “from within, out of the heart of men” (Mark 7:21) establish about the universal scope of Jesus' teaching?
4. Read Proverbs 16:1–3 and 21:1–2 and identify the specific contrast each passage draws between the person's self-assessment and the Lord's assessment. What does the phrase “all the ways of a man are clean in his own sight” (16:2) establish about the universality of the self-flattering self-assessment? What does “the Lord weighs the motives” (16:2) and “the Lord weighs the hearts” (21:2) establish about the nature and reliability of the divine assessment? And how do these Proverbs texts develop and apply the specific principle of Jeremiah 17:9's declaration that the heart is more deceitful than all else?
5. Read Ezekiel 36:24–27 in its context and identify every specific element of the New Covenant promise. What does God promise to remove (verse 26)? What does He promise to give (verse 26)? What does He promise to put within (verse 27)? And what does He promise will result from the Spirit's indwelling (verse 27)? For each element, identify the specific correspondence to the problem diagnosed in Jeremiah 17:9: what specifically in the Ezekiel provision addresses the *aqov* condition, and what specifically addresses the *anush* condition?
6. Read Psalm 139:1–6 and 23–24 together. What does the opening section (verses 1–6) establish about the nature and scope of the divine knowledge of the person? How does the comprehensive divine knowledge of sitting and rising, thinking and walking, words before they are spoken (verse 4) relate to Jeremiah 17:10's claim that “I, the Lord, search the heart, I test the mind”? And what is the specific posture of the prayer in verses 23–24, and how does it represent the appropriate response of a person who has genuinely understood Jeremiah 17:9?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

7. The lesson argues that Jeremiah 17:9's *aqov* (deceitful) heart primarily deceives its own possessor rather than primarily deceiving others. Is this reading of the direction of the deception clearly supported by the text of Jeremiah 17:9, or is it an inference drawn from the context of Proverbs 16:2 and 21:2? What specific features of the Jeremiah text support the self-directed interpretation? And what are the theological

consequences for the doctrine of total depravity if the heart's primary deception is self-directed rather than other-directed?

8. The lesson presents Jeremiah 17:9's anush (incurably sick) as the Old Testament's declaration that the heart's condition is beyond human remedy and requires the specific divine provision of Ezekiel 36:26's new heart. Evaluate this connection. Is the connection between Jeremiah 17:9's anush and Ezekiel 36:26's new heart explicitly made in the canonical Old Testament, or is it a theological inference from the two texts read in canonical context? What other Old Testament texts might be cited to support or qualify this connection?
9. Jesus' teaching in Matthew 15:18–20 and Mark 7:20–23 establishes the heart as the source from which all specific sins flow. The lesson draws from this the principle that the primary target of pastoral care should be the heart rather than the behavior. Evaluate this principle. Is there a risk that this principle, taken to an extreme, could be used to minimize the importance of behavioral accountability and specific counsel about specific sins in pastoral care? How does a right understanding of the heart-as-source principle actually intensify rather than diminish the urgency of behavioral accountability in pastoral care?
10. The lesson presents the doctrine of the heart's self-deception as creating a specific pastoral epistemology: the pastor cannot simply accept self-reports at face value but must engage with the awareness that the counselee's self-assessment is being generated by a constitutively unreliable source. Evaluate the practical implications of this pastoral epistemology. Does it risk undermining the pastor's trust in the counselee's honesty? Does it risk creating a paternalistic dynamic in which the pastor consistently knows better than the counselee what is actually going on in the counselee's heart? How does the lesson's emphasis on the Spirit's illuminating work and the Word's penetrating function address these risks?
11. The Jeremiah-to-Ezekiel-to-New-Testament trajectory that the lesson traces, from the diagnosis of the corrupt heart (Jeremiah 17:9) through the promise of the new heart (Ezekiel 36:26) to the fulfillment in regeneration (John 3; Ephesians 2:5), is presented as one of the most illuminating canonical-theological movements in the Old Testament's witness to the gospel. Evaluate the legitimacy of this canonical reading. Is the connection between Jeremiah 17:9 and Ezekiel 36:26 a connection that the Old Testament itself makes explicitly, or is it a Christian theological reading of two texts in canonical context? Does the New Testament explicitly connect these Old Testament texts in the way the lesson suggests?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

12. The lesson argues that the heart's constitutive self-deception means that the gap between "all the ways of a man are clean in his own sight" (Proverbs 16:2) and the Lord's actual assessment of those ways is the measure of every person's self-deception. Apply this to your own most recent self-assessment in a morally significant area of your life. In a recent conflict, a recent failure of obedience, a recent pattern of sin, or a recent pastoral relationship, in what direction did your own self-assessment place you? Did it consistently find you more in the right, more justified, more sinned-against than sinning? If so, that is the *aqov* heart's characteristic self-presentation, and the Psalm 139:23–24 prayer is the specific appropriate response.
13. The lesson identifies Hebrews 4:12's description of the Word as "sharp" and "piercing" and "able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart" as the specific pastoral tool that Jeremiah 17:9's diagnosis demands. Evaluate your own engagement with the Word of God in terms of this function. Are you reading, studying, hearing, and meditating on the Scripture with the expectation that it will surface what your heart has been concealing? Are you bringing the full counsel of God to bear on the full range of your moral and spiritual life, including the areas where your own self-assessment has been most consistently favorable? What specific changes to your Scripture engagement, in content, in depth, in the prayerful posture with which you approach it, would bring it more fully into alignment with its specific function as the instrument of heart-knowledge that Hebrews 4:12 describes?
14. The doctrine of the new heart (Ezekiel 36:26) is the specific New Covenant provision that corresponds to the specific Old Covenant diagnosis (Jeremiah 17:9). The possession of the new heart is the evidence of regeneration; the desires, loves, and responses of the new heart are the fruits of the Spirit's indwelling work.

Apply this framework to your own assurance of salvation. Is your assurance grounded primarily in the quality and consistency of your own performance (which the *aqov* heart will consistently assess more favorably than warranted) or primarily in the divine promise that “I will give you a new heart” and the corresponding evidence of new desires, new loves, and genuine responsiveness to God that the new heart produces? How does this distinction between performance-based and promise-grounded assurance affect the stability and the character of your assurance?

15. The Pharisee of Luke 18:11–12 is the paradigm case of the *aqov* heart’s self-assessment: he thanks God that he is not like other men, and his self-assessment is entirely favorable by comparison with those he evaluates as beneath him. The tax collector of Luke 18:13 is the paradigm case of the heart-knowledge that only the Spirit’s convicting work produces: “God, be merciful to me, the sinner!” Which of these two postures more accurately describes the characteristic posture of your own prayer? Are you typically the one who compares yourself favorably with others and thanks God for the favorable comparison, or the one who knows enough about Jeremiah 17:9 to bring the unpretified condition of an *aqov* and *anush* heart to the only Physician who can address it? What specific spiritual practices would cultivate more consistently the tax collector’s posture rather than the Pharisee’s?
16. The lesson concludes with the doxological recognition that the new heart that the believer now possesses was given, not earned, that every verb in Ezekiel 36:26 is divine first-person singular, establishing the sovereign monergistic character of the heart transplant that regeneration effects. How does this recognition shape the way you understand and describe your own spiritual life and growth? Do you speak and think about your love for God, your desire for obedience, and your growth in holiness as achievements you have accomplished through sustained effort, or as the fruits of the new heart that the God of Ezekiel 36:26 gave you and the Spirit of verse 27 empowers? And how does the specifically divine character of the provision, every verb is God’s action, not yours, ground a doxology that gives all the glory not to your effort but to the God who gave you what you could not give yourself?

Prayer Focus

Open this lesson's time of prayer with the Psalm 139:23–24 prayer, prayed not as a liturgical formula but as the honest, Spirit-dependent request that Jeremiah 17:9 requires of the person who has genuinely understood its diagnosis: "Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me and know my anxious thoughts; and see if there be any hurtful way in me, and lead me in the everlasting way." This prayer is the specific response to the specific problem: the heart that is more deceitful than all else and desperately sick cannot understand itself ("who can understand it?"), and the appropriate response to a self-knowledge capacity that is constitutively unreliable is to invite the only Assessor whose knowledge of the heart is accurate. Pray this prayer slowly, phrase by phrase: "Search me", an active verb inviting the penetrating divine scrutiny that the Word's function as a two-edged sword (Hebrews 4:12) applies. "And know my heart", the open-handed acknowledgment that the heart is not yet fully known to you, that its deceptions are still in operation, that there are ways in which the *aqov* condition continues to generate a more flattering self-assessment than the Lord's assessment would corroborate. "Try me and know my anxious thoughts", the specific invitation to the Spirit's testing of the thoughts that the heart produces, including the anxious, rationalizing, self-protective thoughts that the *anush* condition generates when it senses the approach of honest self-knowledge. "See if there be any hurtful way in me", the humble acknowledgment that there may be hurtful ways that your own heart has successfully concealed from your own self-assessment, and the genuine willingness to receive what the divine searching finds. "And lead me in the everlasting way", the confident hope that the God who searches the heart and finds the hurtful way also leads in the everlasting way, that the diagnosis is not the final word but the preparation for the provision.

Pray in the structure of the Jeremiah 17:9 diagnosis, moving through each dimension of the heart's corruption as a personal confession rather than a doctrinal survey. Begin with the *aqov* dimension, the deceitfulness of the heart. Confess specifically the ways in which your heart's self-assessment has been producing a more favorable account of your own condition than the Lord's assessment would support: the areas of your life where you have consistently placed yourself in the most sympathetic light, where your account of your relationships has consistently found you more in the right than in the wrong, where your spiritual self-report has consistently identified growth and minimized failure. Do not merely make a general confession of self-deception; ask the Spirit to illuminate the specific forms that the *aqov* heart's self-flattery takes in your specific life. Then move to the *anush* dimension, the incurability of the heart by human means. Confess specifically the specific patterns of sin or remaining corruption in your own heart that have proven resistant to your own sustained efforts at reform: the besetting sin that you have repeatedly resolved to conquer and have not, the disordered affection that you have repeatedly tried to reorder and have not, the darkened area of understanding that you have repeatedly tried to illuminate by your own intellectual effort and have not. These are the specific *anush* manifestations in your own regenerate heart of the incurability that only the Spirit's ongoing sanctifying work can address.

Pray together in three directions for the specific application of this lesson's content. First, for the members of your congregation who are most visibly living in the self-deception of the *aqov* heart, whose consistent self-presentation is more flattering than the pattern of their lives supports, who have explained away the evidence of the heart's corruption with the remarkable creativity that the *aqov* heart consistently deploys in its own defense. Pray specifically for the Spirit's convicting work in these specific persons: that the Word of God, preached with faithful precision, would do the work that Hebrews 4:12 says it can do, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, judging the thoughts and intentions of the heart, surfacing what the *aqov* heart has successfully concealed. Second, for those in your sphere whose pattern of sin has proven *anush*, persistently and apparently irremediably resistant to all the ordinary means of behavioral change and spiritual formation. Pray for them the specific provision of Ezekiel 36:26, not merely for the resolution of the specific pattern of sin but for the new heart from which the pattern flows, the indwelling Spirit who empowers the new heart's response to the divine statutes. Third, for yourself: that the Psalm 139:23–24 posture would be not an occasional resort in moments of crisis but the habitual orientation of your daily walk, the specific, humble, consistently practiced invitation to the divine scrutiny that alone can penetrate the deceptions of your own deceitful heart and lead you in the everlasting way.

Close with a meditation on the two-fold promise of Ezekiel 36:26–27 as the New Covenant’s specific, comprehensive, sovereign answer to the Jeremiah-17:9 diagnosis. “I will give you a new heart”, the specific answer to the aqov heart: a heart that is new, not merely improved, not merely reformed, but given by the God who is the only One who can give what the old heart could not become. “I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh”, the specific answer to the anush heart: the incurable organ is removed, the incurable disease goes with it, and in its place is the living, responsive, God-oriented heart that the stony heart was constitutively incapable of becoming. “I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes”, the ongoing empowerment of the new heart by the divine Presence who indwells it, ensuring that the new heart’s new capacities are not left to their own resources but are continuously sustained, directed, and empowered by the Spirit who lives within. This is the gospel’s final word to Jeremiah 17:9: not that the diagnosis is wrong, but that the Physician is greater than the disease, the provision is more powerful than the problem, and the new heart that sovereign grace has given is the beginning of the everlasting way in which the Lord, who has searched the heart and known it, is also the Lord who leads it home. Soli Deo Gloria.

“For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do.”

Hebrews 4:12–13, NASB 1995

Key Texts: Jeremiah 17:5–10; Matthew 15:10–20; Mark 7:14–23; Proverbs 4:23; 16:2; 21:2; Ezekiel 36:24–27; Psalm 139:1–6, 23–24; Hebrews 4:12–13; Genesis 6:5; Luke 18:9–14; Romans 10:3; John 3:3–8; Ephesians 2:4–5

Soli Deo Gloria

To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

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