

# THE HEART: Introduction

A simple word search for the term “heart,” will yield over 850 verses and over 1,000 mentions across your Old and New Testament, depending on the translation you use. Putting the same word into Google will give you everything from biology to the psychology of emotional health to popular music lyrics. We use “heart” often in our conversations: to talk about what we care about (“I have a heart for the homeless community”), or someone else’s perseverance (“they have a lot of heart”), or even just our physical organ (“My heart is racing!”)

If the Bible mentions it often and we talk about it just as much (if not more), it is probably a good idea to spend time studying what Scripture says about “the heart.”

To the Biblical authors, “the heart” referred to the place in human life where all decision-making, moral understanding, and action comes from: it is the place from which we all live. You and I live from our hearts. This is why Proverbs 4:23 says, “Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.” It’s also why Jesus famously said, “For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (Matthew 12:34).

Looking at these verses carefully, you can see that what comes from the heart can be a good thing or a bad thing—a source of great help or great pain. In this curriculum, we will learn more about this place from which we all live, as we seek a Biblical understanding of the good and the bad of “the heart.”

To do so, we will build off of Andy Stanely’s *Enemies of the Heart*, an excellent book on this exact subject. We will begin Week 1 by looking at what the heart is and why it is important. Then, we will examine four different “enemies” of the heart: guilt, anger, jealousy, and fear. In addition to these enemies, we will seek Biblical solutions: how might we live not with a heart of chaos—filled with jealousy and anger—but live out of a pure heart of gratitude, joy, and peace? Join us as we learn to guard our hearts and ask Jesus to change them.

# Week 1 - What is “the heart” and why is it important?

## Icebreaker (before anything else):

- When was the last time you did something super impulsive that turned out to be a really great decision? Or, can you tell the group about a time when you did something super impulsive and it turned out to be a terrible decision?

## READ: “Enemies of the Heart” excerpt

“Somehow what’s in our hearts, good or bad, is eventually translated into words and deeds. That’s a bit scary. Especially since it’s so hard to know what’s going on in there...we’re always surprised when it happens, aren’t we? Why? Perhaps because we’re so out of touch with our hearts.”

-Andy Stanley, *Enemies of the Heart*, pg. 31

"It takes a habit to break a habit. You can pray every day for a generous heart, but until you start exercising your heart in that direction, nothing's going to change. You need to develop some new habits. Like physical exercise, implementing these [new habits] is often a matter of sheer discipline. An act of the will. A feeling-defying act of the will."

-Andy Stanley, *Enemies of the Heart*, pg. 88-89

## THREE TRUTHS ABOUT THE HEART FROM SCRIPTURE:

**> The heart is the starting point for all of our actions. It includes our desires, thoughts, and feelings.**

### Read:

- Matthew 15:1-20
- Proverbs 4:23

### Discuss:

1. Reading the passage above, what was Jesus’ main criticism of the Pharisees and scribes?

2. After reading this passage, how do you think Jesus would define “the heart?”
3. In what ways have you experienced what Jesus talks about in Matthew 15:18? How have you seen this to be true?
4. How have your emotions, feelings, and desires shaped how you walk with Jesus?

### **> The heart is unreliable and broken.**

#### **Read:**

- Jeremiah 17:5-10

#### **Discuss:**

1. How might Jeremiah’s prophecy correct our current culture that says “follow your heart”?

### **> The heart needs the true God to guide it properly.**

#### **Read:**

- Jeremiah 17:10
- Proverbs 3:5-8

#### **Discuss:**

1. What does it mean to “trust the Lord” with “all of your heart?”
2. Andy Stanley says “it takes a habit to break a habit.” How have you seen new habits help shape your heart? What habits might you need to introduce into your life with Jesus this year?

### **Application for this week:**

Pay attention to and write down the condition of your heart: in what ways do you see its brokenness this week? In what ways are you actively trusting God with your heart and with how you feel/think before you act?

# Week 2 - Guilt and confession

## ICEBREAKER (before anything else):

- What was one rule you had growing up that your parents repeated to you over and over again? What do you think of that rule now?

## READ TOGETHER:

As we learned last week, the heart is where everything begins: from our desires and emotions and thoughts come our actions. You cannot separate the fruit of action with the root of our heart. But we also learned that the heart is deceitful (Jeremiah 17) and needs to be led by God as we walk with Jesus (Proverbs 3:5-7).

So what does it mean to have our hearts “led by God?” It means that we will be aware of the subtle but important ways our own hearts distrust God’s plan. It also will mean we will be aware of all the things that keep us from walking with Jesus.

To describe this, we are using Andy Stanley’s phrase “Enemies of the Heart.” Each week, we will look at one of the enemies of our hearts that cause us to mistrust God and one practice to combat those enemies. A further study of this can be found in Andy’s book, *Enemies of the Heart*.

## **THE PROBLEM OF GUILT AND THE SOLUTION OF CONFESSION:**

**> Guilt is the feeling of responsibility and regret we have when we do something wrong, either on purpose or not.**

### **Read:**

- Psalm 51:1-6

### **Discuss:**

1. David wrote Psalm 51: what was his posture towards his sin? How did he respond to his guilt?

2. What new insights about guilt come up after reading this text?

**> Confession is owning our part of sin and naming it before God and others. Confession is the practice that combats guilt.**

**Read:**

- Psalm 51:7-12

**Discuss:**

1. Where and how does David direct his guilt? How does he practice confession?
2. How have you practiced confession?

**> Confession cures our guilt because when we confess we can sense God's grace activating in our life.**

**Read:**

- 1 John 1:5-10
- James 5:15-16

**Discuss:**

1. What promises exist in these verses about confession?

**Application to do in your group tonight:**

Pair up with one other person and practice confession however you feel comfortable. You certainly do not need to share anything you do not want to, but we encourage everyone to share *something*: where do you need to take ownership of wrong that you have done? And how can you trust the grace of God in the midst of your guilt? As you confess, remember we don't confess *for* forgiveness but rather *from* forgiveness. Jesus has already purchased forgiveness on the cross, which means we can boldly approach Him. Rest in the power of knowing we are forgiven — sin has no power over you.

# Week 3 - Anger and forgiveness

## ICEBREAKER (before anything else):

- What is one of your pet peeves?

## READ TOGETHER:

The “enemy” in our own heart this week is anger. Anger is usually a feeling that is associated with feeling *owed* something from someone or some experience. Dallas Willard says that wherever anger is, a wounded ego is nearby. Psychologists tell us that anger is a secondary emotion—it comes *after* another emotion: sadness, offense, hurt, etc., usually comes first, but it is anger that boils up. We are always angry *because of something*.

The way we fight this enemy is through forgiveness. Forgiveness is primarily a transactional word. When we begin to forgive someone, we say, “you do not owe me anything.” If anger says, “you owe me,” then the path out of it is through forgiveness, which says, “you do not owe me anymore.”

## **THE PROBLEM OF ANGER AND THE SOLUTION OF FORGIVENESS:**

**> Anger can be either righteous or unrighteous, good and bad.**

### **Read:**

- Matthew 5:21-26
- Ephesians 4:25-27
- Mark 3:1-6 (notice that Jesus looked at them “in anger” in verse 5)

### **Discuss:**

1. After reading these texts, what is the difference between righteous and unrighteous anger—or, “good” anger and bad anger?

2. Why was Jesus angry in Mark 3 and what can that tell us about our anger?

## **> Forgiveness is possible because of the gospel.**

### **Read:**

- Matthew 18:21-35

### **Discuss:**

1. What does this story teach us about the nature of forgiveness?
2. How does *being forgiven by God* help us forgive others?

## **> Some truths about forgiveness to reflect upon:**

- Forgiveness is not a single event, but a process on which we embark.
- Forgiveness can be done “from the heart” (Matthew 18:35) and does not require us to engage with dangerous or hurtful people.
- Forgiveness is not the same thing as reconciliation: forgiveness is just up to us, but reconciliation happens when both people take a humble step towards one another—know the difference!
- Forgiveness does not mean forgetting. We can remember the hurt and even still feel the hurt, while also taking a step towards forgiveness.

### **Application to do in your group tonight:**

Answer this question in your group: who do you need to forgive? Then, provide each person with someone in the group who will pray for them this week, that God would help them begin or continue the process of forgiveness.

# Week 4 - Jealousy and celebration

## ICEBREAKER (before anything else):

- Who were you most jealous of in elementary school? It could be a celebrity, a sibling, a friend—anyone.

## READ TOGETHER:

If our anger is about another person owing us something due to some hurt they have caused, then jealousy is the intense feeling that *God* owes us something we believe we deserve. Jealousy takes many forms you might be familiar with: career (how come God gave *them* success and not me?), family of origin (if God gave me *that* kind of family, things would be different), and all other kinds of circumstances. Whenever we feel like God has not adequately supplied us with circumstances and resources for a good life, jealousy rears its ugly head. This is why it is an enemy of our heart.

The way to combat jealousy is with celebration. Celebration is gratitude habitualized. Celebration is when we pause, give thanks to God for what we currently have, and do so in community. The power of pausing to eat together, say thanks to God, write a note of gratitude, or simply say a brief prayer in awe of God's gifts is to practice gratitude. And these practices have a powerful effect on our temptation to be jealous and therefore ruin our hearts.

"Ridding the heart of jealousy begins with this recognition: the problem is that I'm not getting what I want.. the solution is pouring out your heart to Him and sharing the frustration and discontent...this is why celebration is the solution because we have to celebrate the stuff/success of those we tend to envy and make it a habit. Don't wait until you feel like celebrating; celebrate until you feel like it."

-Andy Stanley, *Enemies of the Heart*, p.173 + 180

## **THE PROBLEM OF JEALOUSY AND THE SOLUTION OF CELEBRATION:**

**> Jealousy leads to lack of contentment and quarreling.**

**Read:**



- James 3:13-18
- 1 Corinthians 3:1-9

### **Discuss:**

1. How can jealousy lead to further sin?
2. What is the relationship between jealousy and comparison?

### **> Celebration must be a habit.**

### **Read:**

- Psalm 136:1-5
- 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

### **Discuss:**

1. How often do you give thanks? What does a habit of celebration look like in your life? What might it look like in the rhythm of your group?

### **Application to do in your group tonight:**

Create a plan as a group for how you will celebrate the goodness of God together.

# Week 5 - Fear and courage

## ICEBREAKER (before anything else):

- What were you foolishly or irrationally afraid of as a child?

## READ TOGETHER:

Fear is the dominating emotion when we feel threatened or in potential danger, threatened by something or something. Fear can be sudden and intense—like when you nearly avoid a car accident—or slow and subtle—like when your finances start to get dire slowly over a year. The most common command in the Bible is to not be afraid. God actually commands many people to “have no fear.” This is easier said than done. Fear seems to be an inescapable human emotion—how can we choose to *not* be afraid?

Like each of these “enemies” of our hearts, the goal for our study is not to delete our feelings, but submit them to Jesus in discipleship. We do this by practicing things that help us battle these enemies in our hearts. When we are afraid, God is not asking us to delete fear, but to overcome fear with courageous faith in him. Courage is not the absence of fear, but the presence of action in the midst of fear. Christians are asked to do what God commands them to do even when we are afraid. The more we do this—in large and small ways—the more we will grow in our faith in Jesus Christ.

## **THE PROBLEM OF FEAR AND THE SOLUTION OF COURAGE:**

**> Read this story from Exodus and discuss the ways in which God walks with Moses through his fear.**

### **Read:**

- Exodus 3:9-15
- Exodus 4:1-5
- Exodus 4:10-17

## **Discuss:**

1. What were the various reasons Moses was afraid?
2. How did God answer and provide for Moses in the midst of his fear?
3. Moses still had to do the things he was scared about doing (leading the people of Israel). This might lead us to believe that God does not always remove the thing we're afraid of, but how does God care for us even as we go do the things we're afraid of?
4. In what ways can we pray differently when we're afraid?
5. What are you afraid of or anxious about right now and how can your group pray for you?

## **Read and discuss:**

Courage is the practice of centering ourselves in prayer before God, asking him to relieve us of fear as we confess what we are afraid of, and then trusting he will supply and moving forward. But fear can also be a positive emotion that keeps us from harmful circumstances. It is important to acknowledge that not everything we are afraid of we must go do "in faith." Faith is also wisdom that says, "this is not the right thing to do," and following through on that. Discernment is also a key way to fight the enemy of "fear." How might wisdom/discernment help you in understanding the things you currently fear?

## **Application to do this week:**

With wisdom and discernment, do one thing you sense God is asking you to do that you've been afraid to do. It might be talking with a neighbor or certain friend about something, but it also might be quitting some habit that makes you feel safe. It doesn't need to be big, but find something you can do with courage to begin to practice the muscle of faith.