

Shepherding a Child's Heart

1. Intro & Context

- How would you respond if you were the parent or carer in these scenarios
 - Sarah is an able student but her teacher calls to tell you she's not doing her homework –
 - Tommy has a tendency to get angry and storm off in a huff when he loses to his brother
 - Jessica regularly complains to you that all the other kids in her group have things that she doesn't and its just not fair
 - Stevie is constantly clowning around in class and getting into trouble
- What would you do?
- How would you handle it?
- What approach would you take?

- Today we're carrying on where Tim Bowden left off on Tuesday night at our parenting seminar
- Tim's main point in future-proofing our kids was to equip them to deal with adversity
- In other words, developing their character to deal with challenges, struggles and brokenness of our world is far more important than memorising Shakespeare or mathematical formulas or dates in history
- And today we are going to continue thinking about the formation of character in the parenting of our children
 - Little unnerving speaking on the topic of parenting when there are 2 of my own children sitting in the congregation listening and critiquing everything I say
 - Yeah .. he does that
 - Nah ... he doesn't do that
- So I speak today knowing full well that I am a deeply flawed father
 - And therefore, it's not my wisdom I seek to share with you
 - It is the wisdom of the perfect Father ... who gives us his wisdom in his word
- And so it's to his word we turn now on this topic of parenting

PRAY

2. Diagnosing the heart

- One of the vital understandings of parenting is the centrality of the child's heart in driving behaviour
- Solomon says in Proverbs 4:23

- *Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life"*
- Solomon's point is ... the heart is like an artesian spring
 - All our hopes, desires and dreams gush from the heart
 - What we value and love the most flows out of our heart
- And therefore,
 - the way we live > the way we think, act and speak
 - is driven by the heart
- And therefore the heart is the driving force behind all human behaviour
 - This is true for adults ... and it certainly true for children as well

- Jesus makes this clear in the passage we read this morning from Luke 6
- He uses the analogy of a tree
 - ⁴³ *"No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. ⁴⁴ Each tree is recognized by its own fruit. People do not pick figs from thorn bushes, or grapes from briars.*
- In other words, the test of a tree is the fruit it bears
 - Good tree bears good fruit > a bad tree bears bad fruit

- Then listen to how Jesus applies this to us
 - ⁴⁵ *The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his **heart**, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his **heart**. For out of the overflow of his **heart** his mouth speaks.*
- His point is this ... the behaviour of a person is flows out of their heart
- And the key truth for us to understand is ... if we are going to be effective in parenting our children, we must address their hearts
 - If we don't address the heart of our children, we will ultimately fail in raising our kids to live and act in ways that are good and godly

- **Illustration – Apple Tree**
- Pretend I have an apple tree in the back yard
- Each year it buds and grows apples, but when the apples mature, they're dry and wrinkled and floury
- After a few years I decide I've had enough and I decide I'm going to fix the tree
- So one day I head out into the back yard with branch cutters, a staple gun a step ladder and a box of Red Delicious apples
- And you watch as I carefully cut off all the bad apples and then staple all the beautiful Red Delicious apples onto the branches of the tree

- And eventually my bizarre behaviour gets the better of you and so you come out and ask me what I am doing and I proudly say "I'm fixing my apple tree"
- Of course ... stapling apples to the branches of my apple tree, does nothing to fix my tree – does it?
- To fix my tree I need to
 - Dig around the roots and fertilise the soil
 - Because the cause of the bad apples is the tree!

- This is a good example of what we tend to do in parenting our children
 - Often we tend to focus on the external behaviour of our children and lose sight of the internal machinations of the heart
 - We try and fix the apples of behaviour, rather than addressing the root cause of the behaviour

- There are various ways we try to fix the behaviour of our children
- We
 - reward them
 - make promises to them
 - negotiate with them
 - bribe them
 - shame them
 - threaten them
 - guilt them
 - praise them; or
 - all in an effort to secure the behavioural outcomes we desire
- But whether we use 'a carrot or a stick', it is all behaviourism

- Let me give you some examples
- You say to your child
 - "You know, you have ten stickers on the chart, when you get five more, then Dad will buy you an ice cream. If you're really good today, you could get those stickers"
- Or you're out shopping
 - "If you and your sister are good while I do the shopping, then I'll buy you a Freddo Frog at the checkout"
- Or you say to your child
 - "If your grades improve this term, then I'll give you an extra \$100 pocket money"

- When we do that ... what we're doing is bribing our kids with rewards or incentives to behave the way we want

- Another way we try to manipulate behaviour is through fear of punishment
- "If you do that again ...
 - You can go to your room
 - There'll be no Xbox for a week
 - You'll be grounded for life"

- Or we can do it through fear of shame
- "I can't believe you did that! You're brother would never do that"
- "Don't you realise how awful you are when you do that? If you keep going down this path you'll end up like Michael!"

- When we do this we're just stapling apples to the branches
- There's a number of problems when we do this
- Firstly ... it doesn't address the real need of our children
 - Addressing behaviour without speaking to the heart bypasses the profound needs of the heart
 - It's like trying to solve the problem of weeds in your backyard using a lawn mower
 - You might succeed in mowing down the weeds, but they'll grow back because you haven't dealt with their roots

- Secondly ... it gives our kids a false basis for ethics
 - In other words, the basis for doing the right thing is pragmatic
 - We're training them to choose to do the right thing based on whether or not they will get a reward or get punished
- If you don't address the heart, then once
 - the reward is no longer offered ... or
 - the fear of punishment or shame is no longer a threat ...
 - They'll revert to pleasing the desires of their heart
 - Because the heart has not been trained

- Thirdly ... it obscures the gospel
 - The good news of Jesus and the transforming power of the gospel will be missed if we only focus on the behaviour and don't address the heart
 - Parenting without the gospel is like trying to fight with one arm tied behind your back
 - And it robs the child of the power to change

- Focusing only on behaviour doesn't bring about lasting change nor does it train our children's hearts, character and long term godliness
- And so as we parent our children we need to ensure we are addressing the hearts of our kids, not just the external behaviour

3. Shepherding the heart

- John Wooden¹ famously said ... *"The true test of a man's character is what he does when no one is watching."*
- Proverbs 22:6 says – *Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it*
- Our goal as parents is to train our children so that when they leave the nest (so to speak) God is the one who rules their hearts ... so that they leave with a godly character that will underpin a life of godliness
- So how do we parent well to ensure this is the case
- Well we need to focus on shepherding the child's heart ... and not just focus on the external behaviour
- So for the child who's not taking their studies seriously and getting poor grades
 - The answer is not to bribe him to work harder
 - We must realise the grades are a window to the thoughts and motives of his heart
 - We need to see what desires of the heart lead him to use the time he has for study on things of much less importance like Youtube > Xbox > Facebook > etc
- When Sarah yells out
 - "Muuuum! Joey's taking another muffin"
 - You'll need to deal with Joey for taking the muffin ... but you also need to deal with Sarah too
 - Sarah's not telling you about Joey taking the extra muffin because she's worried about Joey's weight or cholesterol
 - She wants justice because she's missing out!
 - She doesn't want Joey to have what she doesn't have
 - "You have it, I don't - so I'm going to make sure you don't get it either"
 - There's a heart issue of envy or covetousness

¹ American basketball player and coach

- When your daughter doesn't want to comply with the school uniform code ... or wearing clothes you disapprove of
 - What's the heart issue? It's not just a desire to rebel
 - Probably a desire for approval as she seeks to fit in with her peers
- You could say
 - "I was wondering why you thought it was okay to wear those things even though you know you're not meant to?"
 - "I dunno?"
 - "Do you feel embarrassed or left out when you're not fitting with what the others are wearing?"
- And then you can begin to teach them that they're already approved of by God and therefore she doesn't need to go seeking the approval of others

- The child who hits their sibling who took the toy off them
 - Rather than merely scolding one for snatching and the other for hitting
 - It's a opportunity to talk about showing kindness and love to one another

- When Alex calls his younger brother 'a loser'
 - Rather than just rebuke him for his narky comment ... we need to get to the heart of that issue
 - Is it a desire for power as he tries to bolster his own self worth by putting his sibling down and keeping them in their place?

- What about when your child gets upset because they lose a board game or lose at soccer or get out without scoring runs in cricket
 - We can censure the tantrum
 - But we also need to deal with the heart issue ... which is probably pride
 - And talk to them about humility

- Other times our children will lash out and hurt someone verbally or physically
 - It may be they're retaliating to something already done to them
 - In which case their heart's desire is for revenge
- And so we need to address that with them
 - Teach them it's not their place to seek revenge
 - God has put people in authority to ensure justice is done
 - Parents > home
 - Teachers > school

- We need to trust those people God has put in authority to do what is right
- Do you see how ungodly and unrighteous behaviour flows from issues of the heart
- And therefore, the goal of our parenting is to train or shepherd the hearts of our children so their hearts are governed by God?
- Because this is what will lead to godliness and righteous behaviour
- Because unless we're dealing with those issues of the heart ... it's like we're trying to stable apples to branches of the apple tree

- So as parents and carers, we want to take all the opportunities we can we train a child's heart
- Rather than ...
 - Desire for revenge > Entrusting self to God
 - Fear of man > Fear of God
 - Pride > Humility
 - Love of self > Love of others
 - Covetousness > Generosity
 - Envy > Contentment
 - Hatred > Love
 - Anger > Forgiveness
 - Approval of others > Approval of God
 - Rebellion > Submission

- Galatians 6:1 says
 - *Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted*
- Now this is helpful advice for us as parents as we nurture our children through these times of learning
- The aim of dealing with a moment of sin or ungodliness is the child's restoration

Parents Hearts

- One of the barriers to parents shepherding a child's heart is if we fail to recognise we need to deal with our own hearts as well
- It's waste of time to think about strategies for parenting our children without examining ourselves first
- If our hearts are controlled by something other than God, we won't be able to train and shepherd the hearts of our kids like we ought

- You see, our kids aren't the only ones whose hearts need training
 - Ours do too
 - It's not like you get to some magical age of adulthood – be it 18 or 25 and 'hey presto' no more wayward desires of the heart
- John Calvin said 'the human heart is an idol factory'
 - And us adults have just as many idols and desires of the heart that our kids do that drive and shape our behaviour ... and that is often evident in our parenting

- **Comfort**
- One of those desire of the heart might be comfort
- For the person who lives for comfort ... this will influence and shape their parenting
 - When want comfort ... you will want peace & quiet, harmony and respect ... and when you don't get it you get angry with your kids
 - Because when they take away your comfort, regularity, quiet, space, and harmony because they're misbehaving ... then you'll see your kids as the enemy ... and fail to take the moments to train their hearts

- **Appreciation**
- Another heart idol we might have is appreciation
- If you long for the appreciation of others .. then you'll be constantly looking for your children to appreciate you as their parents
 - "I wash, I cook, I clean, I run them around ... they should appreciate me
- But being appreciated as parents isn't our goal is it?
 - If you've forgotten your vertical relationship with God ... then you'll struggle with resentment and anger and discouragement when you don't get what your heart desires
 - Because what kid bursts through the door in the afternoon and says
 - *"You know what mum ... I was just thinking today at school how much you have done for me over the years and I was flooded with gratitude and I just couldn't wait to get home and tell you how much I appreciate you"*
 - If that ever happens to you, erect stones as a lasting memorial

- **Success**
- Another heart idol that inhibits our parenting is the idol of success
- If you're a person who wants to be seen as successful ... then you'll end up looking to the behaviour of our children as a measure of success of us a parents

- Our children can become trophies where we can display them on the mantles of our lives as living testimonies to a job well done
- And when they don't behave – at the shops or at a friend's house ... we get angry and embarrassed because they're not giving us the desires of our heart
- Classic example is when we lose our temper with our child when they throw a tantrum in the supermarket
- Because in that moment, our reputation and success as a parent is more important than training their hearts

- **Control**
- Another idol of the heart is the desire for control
- And if your heart idol is control ... then you'll
 - Manipulate them to do the things you want them to so you feel in control
 - You won't let them do things you can't control
 - Overreact when they do things you don't want them to and so make you feel out of control

- So we can't consider the challenge of shepherding a child's heart without honestly looking at what we as parents bring to the struggle
 - If our hearts are ruled by comfort, appreciation, success or control ... we will unwittingly parent our children to meet the needs of **our** hearts ... and not the spiritual needs of **their** hearts
- Instead of seeing moments of struggle as God given moments of opportunity to train their hearts ...
 - We'll see them as frustrating, disappointing irritants ...
 - And we'll experience growing anger against the children God has called us to shepherd, love and train up for a life of righteousness

4. Transforming the heart

- Now this might be a bit overwhelming
 - We need to shepherd our child's heart
 - We also need to deal with the idols of our own heart
- How is this possible?
- By God's grace ... he helps us

- **Hearts transformed by the Spirit**
- **Ezekiel 36:25-27** –²⁵ *I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols.* ²⁶

I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

- In these OT verses, God promises there'll come a day when he will overcome the problem of our rebellious hearts
 - Out of our hearts come all sorts of evil
 - And God promised ... that one day in the future he would cleanse our hearts from all impurities and idols
 - He will wash us clean, make us new
 - And that he would us new hearts
- How?
 - In v26 God says he will put his HS in us ... to turn our hearts of stone into hearts of flesh
- In other words ...
 - He will transform our hearts
 - By the Spirit, he himself would transform the roots of the tree so it can begin to produce good fruit

- That applies to our children ... AND us parents too
- Because we both need our hearts to be transformed

- ***Hearts transformed by the Gospel***
- How does the HS transform our hearts?
- The role of the Spirit is to point us to Jesus²
- It's as the HS points us to Christ and his love for us on the cross ... that our hearts can be transformed
- You see ... as you keep point your child to Jesus and his death for them on the cross they see
 - what humility looks like
 - what forgiveness & mercy looks like
 - what patience looks like
 - what kindness looks like
 - what love looks like
 - what generosity looks like
 - what submission looks like
- As you keep pointing your kids to Christ;

² John 16:13-14

- And they see the wonderful grace of God in giving us forgiveness from sin
- That gospel message will transform their hearts as they seek to live in response to all that Christ has done for them at the cross
- But it's not just their hearts that the gospel brings transformation to either
- Because as you and I as parents look to the cross, then all those idols of the heart that inhibit us as we seek to parent our children begin lose their power
 - My heart's desire for comfort will be dismantled as I rejoice in Jesus Christ willingness to give up all his comforts for me so that I may share in all blessings of eternity
 - My heart's desire for control will be weakened as I realise that only God is in control
 - And not only is the situation under control, but God is at work in it doing the good he promised to do (Rom 8:28)
 - My heart's desire for to be a successful parent will lose its grip on me as I see I don't need the approval of others, because Christ's love shown to me at the cross makes it clear what God thinks of me
- And so friends, the thing that's going to transform the hearts of our kids and our hearts as well ... is the work of the Spirit in us as he points us to Jesus and the gospel
- And so that means, if you want to shepherd the heart of your child well ...
 - the best thing you can do is to be pointing them to Christ
 - keep teaching them the gospel
 - and then apply the gospel to their hearts as you parent them day by day
- In addition, the gospel will help equip and empower you as parents as you shepherd your children's hearts.
 - Because the gospel reminds you and I that too we are sinners in need of grace and forgiveness
 - And God's grace and forgiveness to you ... will help you show grace and forgiveness to your child
 - For when they stumble ... you know that you too have stumbled
- And as you get alongside your children and train their hearts and point them to the love and grace of God in Jesus

- There is nothing more powerful and comforting for them than to know that their behaviour or morality is not the standard by which they are accepted and loved
- For when they know they are children of God ... they're already accepted and loved
- And as you help them understand this about their saviour God ... that will shape their hearts to live for him when no one is looking

PRAY