

How Your Heart Shapes Your Mind

By David Feddes

Is your mind a machine? Sometimes we think of it that way. We picture the mind as a sort of computer that takes in data, processes that data, and then spits out answers. Just feed it the right data, and if it's running properly, it will always crank out the right computations.

Now, it's true that some things about the mind are a little like a machine. After all, humans invented machines and computers, so our machines are a little like us. But the mind is a lot more than just a machine. The mind is part of a total person, and there are deeper aspects of a person than just the thoughts you think, the ideas you hold, the logic you use, and what you take as facts. Your thoughts and beliefs are affected by who you are and by things that shape your mind.

In other articles, we've discussed important things that shape your mind. We've explored how your *social setting* (the people you fit in with) shapes your mind. Your companions and cultural setting can make some things seem unthinkable and other things seem entirely obvious. We've also discussed how your *actions*, your patterns of behavior, shape your mind. Your deeds make certain beliefs seem more sensible and other ideas hard to accept. For instance, if you're behaving wickedly, God becomes hard to believe in, and the Bible becomes hard to take seriously. Now that we've seen how your social setting shapes your mind and how your actions shape your mind, let's look in this article at how your *heart* shapes your mind. What moves your inner self? The deepest drives and desires of your inner self have a profound impact on the ideas and thoughts and beliefs that you hold.

Heart Affects Knowledge

Your inner being has a powerful influence on what you hold to be true. Heart affects knowledge. That's emphasized again and again throughout the Bible, especially in Proverbs.

An intelligent heart acquires knowledge (Proverbs 18:15).

The heart of him who has understanding seeks knowledge (Proverbs 15:14).

Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life (Proverbs 4:23).

My son, give me your heart (Proverbs 23:26).

Who can say, "I have made my heart pure; I am clean from my sin?" (Proverbs 20:9)

Your heart, your inner person, is so important because it's the wellspring of life. You've got to guard it. You've got to take care of it. In order to have understanding, you need the right kind of heart. But who can really say, "I've made my heart pure and I'm clean from my sin?"

Some of the worst distortions in our thinking come from distortions in our heart. You've got to have a heart that is operating properly, or your mind is going to be off. If your heart is healthy, then your mind also is going to be more open and able to grasp the truth. It's not enough to have a mind that can process facts; you need a heart with a healthy appetite for truth. Our condition on the inside affects our taste for things.

Your taste for food can change when your inner condition changes, even if the food itself is exactly the same. For instance, my wife, Wendy, normally dislikes Cap'n Crunch cereal and won't touch it. However, whenever she became pregnant, she suddenly craved this sugary cereal. I didn't even need the doctor's test to know she was pregnant. If I saw a box of Capt'n Crunch come home with the groceries, it was a sure sign of pregnancy. Her inner condition changed her appetite. She suddenly loved Cap'n Crunch, which she usually hated; and she suddenly hated chicken, which she usually loved. The foods did not change: chicken was still chicken, and Cap'n Crunch was still Cap'n Crunch. But Wendy's inner condition had changed.

If you're a man, you obviously won't have a change of appetite due to pregnancy, but your inner condition can still influence your appetite. For example, when you're sick, foods that you normally find delicious may suddenly seem disgusting. The food itself is just fine, but you're not fine: your inner condition is sick. When something is wrong with you, things go wrong with your appetite, and foods that you normally experience as delicious suddenly disgust you.

That's what it's like to have a heart that is not right with God and then have God's truth come to you. The truth itself is perfect, but it won't seem right to you. Something deep inside you will tend to reject it. The condition of your heart affects the way your mind receives, or fails to receive, the truth of God. Your ability to believe with your mind is shaped by deeper urges and appetites. When your head finds it hard to believe, the real problem may be in your heart.

Masters of Suspicion

Christians are not the only ones to point out how drives deeper than the intellect can shape the way we think and believe. Some atheist thinkers have been masters of suspicion. They suspected anyone claiming to know any kind of truth. They knew that the heart shapes beliefs.

Karl Marx claimed that economic factors determine our thoughts and ideals. Economic desires shape intellectual thoughts, according to Marx. When Marx listened to somebody talking about truth, he would wonder, "What's really going on? I wonder what they want. I wonder what economic desire is driving these thoughts."

Sigmund Freud was another master of suspicion. He didn't take statements about thoughts or beliefs at face value. He suspected something deeper was going on. Freud claimed that our deep, unconscious urges, such as drives for survival or for sex, dominate the way we think. He was suspicious of the beliefs people claimed to have. He kept wondering what was really going on below the level of conscious thought. Freud wanted to figure out their unconscious motives.

Friedrich Nietzsche was still another atheist who said that beliefs are often driven by something deeper. He talked about the will to power, the desire to control others and to have an impact on the world around us. According to Nietzsche, that's the motivation behind all claims to truth and morality. There really isn't objective truth or morality. Anybody who says, "This is true, and that is false," or, "This is right, and that is wrong," is not really standing for truth or morality. They are just pressing for power and control, insisted Nietzsche. Thoughts and ideas are just intellectual expressions of the deeper will to power.

At one level, it's easy to point out that Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche were atheists and made big mistakes. You could dismiss Marx simply by saying that if everything is economically driven and not corresponding to truth, then his theory is itself not a matter of truth but of the economic forces driving Marx. You could dismiss Freud by saying that if everything is unconscious, wishful thinking, then Freud's own theories are wishful thinking. Freud's own refusal to accept God is wishful thinking. He doesn't believe in God because he wishes God not to be real. Likewise, you could dismiss Nietzsche by saying that if everything is a grab for power, then Nietzsche's own theory is a manipulative grab for power, not a statement of truth. You could deal with these atheists at that level, and rightly so, because they were wrong about the reality of God, and their theories were self-defeating.

But even though they were seriously wrong, they were still right about something. These atheists were wrong to reject God, but they were right to see that many claims to rightness are really a mask for hidden drives of the heart. Many people who claim to be arguing things on intellectual grounds actually have a hidden agenda, and sometimes they're not even aware of that agenda themselves. They are quite self-righteous about what they're saying, but there is

something going on in their heart that they're not aware of. These atheists were correct that often a hidden agenda of the heart drives what we believe, or say we believe. Whether the heart is driven by economic forces (Marx) or overwhelming urges (Freud) or a craving for power (Nietzsche) or something else, the heart-urge, the deepest desire of the inner self, often shapes the mind and determine beliefs more than evidence and logic do.

The heart has a tremendous impact on what we want to believe—and what we *want* to believe will often shape what we *do* believe. Atheist philosopher Thomas Nagel says, I want atheism to be true and am made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers. It isn't just that I don't believe in God... It's that I hope there is no God! ... I have a cosmic authority problem... Darwin enabled modern secular culture to heave a great collective sigh of relief, by apparently providing a way to eliminate purpose, meaning, and design as fundamental features of the world."

Why would you want to get rid of purpose? Why would you want to get rid of meaning? Why would you want to get rid of design and say that the world is just a chaotic, evolving mess? Because you want to get rid of God. You have a cosmic authority problem. Your heart is allergic to God. Your appetite does not desire God. You'll believe in just about anything but God. You want to eliminate purpose, meaning, and design because you know those things are rooted in God. If you can get rid of those, you can get rid of God and heave a big sigh of relief. The cosmic authority problem of your heart results in the atheistic belief of your mind.

The Heart Has Its Reasons

The heart is where much of our thinking is rooted. The Christian philosopher Pascal said, "The heart has its reasons, of which reason knows nothing." Pascal was not against reason. He was one of the great thinkers of all time, a genius in mathematics and philosophy. He was a master of intellectual reasoning and argument. But as a Christian who understood things of the heart, Pascal knew that much of what motivates us for better and for worse is what the heart desires. The heart that desires God may have deep reasons for believing God, even if you can't put your finger on all the intellectual data and evidence for such belief. By the same token, the heart has reasons for wickedness and unbelief that you might not even be aware of. "The heart has its reasons, of which reason knows nothing."

Another brilliant philosopher and mathematician, Rene Descartes, lived at the same time as Pascal. Descartes tried to structure all human knowledge like a mathematical system, as though the human was a thinking machine. Mathematics starts with a foundation of axioms, things that seem self-evident and beyond doubt, and then builds on that foundation using logical deductions and calculations. Descartes tried to make all knowledge like mathematics. He wanted to start from scratch, so he began by doubting everything. Then he tried to find something that could not possibly be doubted. Once he established a foundation of self-evident truths that were beyond doubt, he would build all other knowledge on that foundation using exact, logical reasoning. Then all knowledge would be as clear, logical, and certain as mathematics seemed to Descartes.

But Pascal knew better. He knew that much knowledge surpasses the sort of things we know by the methods of math. He knew that people are more than thinking machines who operate by mathematical laws. Pascal insisted, "The heart has its reasons, of which reason knows nothing." Descartes couldn't retort, "Well, Pascal, you just say that because you're not very good at math, so all you can do is talk about this touchy-feely heart stuff." Pascal was one of the great mathematicians of all time. In fact, Pascal invented the first computing machine, so if anybody

had the right to say the human mind is not just a mathematical machine, the genius Pascal certainly did. If anybody had the right to say that knowledge is much more than just things you cannot doubt and things you can calculate, Pascal did.

Pascal knew that the heart shapes the mind. This affected his approach to evangelism and apologetics. Pascal knew that many people reject Christian truth in their hearts before their minds can even give a fair hearing to Christian claims. Such people would need a change of heart before they would change their mind. Pascal described his strategy for sharing Christianity as “make it attractive, make good men wish it were true, and then show that it is.”

If you are a non-Christian considering Christianity, do you wish it were true? If not, then your mind won't believe what your heart doesn't desire.

If you are a Christian trying to persuade others to believe in Jesus and in his truth, don't assume that they will believe if only you feed enough evidence and proofs to them. That might work if people were just thinking machines, but they're not. The heart shapes the mind.

Heart Motives

Here are six questions that may help explore the heart and its motives.

1. *What desires move you?*

Do you have a longing for God, or an allergy to God? Do you have a cosmic authority problem, a built-in resistance against anyone ruling you? Are you so eager for God not to exist and the Bible not to be true that you are willing to give up meaning and purpose if that will enable you to avoid God and his Word? More broadly, what are your main desires in life, and how do those desires shape the way you think?

2. *What worries or scares you?*

What are the things that you fear? Jesus said, “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matthew 10:28). If your heart is full of worries and fears, it affects your mind. You may focus so much on lesser fears that you don't ever fear what will happen to you if you live and die without God. You may have a hard time believing some biblical truths that upset you or that bother you. Looking at what you fear reveals a lot about your heart.

3. *What are your inclinations?*

This is hard to explain exactly, but what's your tilt? We approach some important ideas and discussions with a tilt in a certain direction. Certainly in the realm of politics, people tilt one way or another way. Some ideas get a better hearing if those ideas match your tilt, but other ideas are rejected without consideration because you tilt in a different direction. You might tilt rightward, you might tilt leftward, but we all have a tilt—and not just in politics. When your heart considers God and the things of God, what's your tilt? Do you lean toward God or away? What are your inclinations?

4. *What makes you feel happy?*

What makes you laugh? What makes you feel good about life? That tells you a lot about your heart. Even many Christians, or people who profess to be Christians, will talk of the right doctrines and do a few things that they think will qualify them for heaven, but in their overall life most of their joy is not from a relationship with God or with God's

people. They get most of their happiness from all sorts of things that seemingly have nothing to do with the reality of Jesus Christ. Their heart is very attached to this world, and they have not set their hearts above where Christ is. If your heart is set on Christ, then your greatest happiness comes from growth in personal knowledge of Christ.

5. *What hidden hurts haunt you?*

Every heart is affected by hidden hurts. Some people were neglected as children. Some had an overly demanding parent. Some were mistreated or molested. Other kinds of terrible wounds have left their mark on the heart. Maybe it occurred in adulthood. You went through a divorce or through some other crisis experience. Heart wounds don't just leave you with certain *thoughts*; those wounds cut deep into your heart, wounds so deep that you might avoid thinking about them. Your mind may shove these wounds into a dark corner and not give them much conscious attention, and yet the hidden hurt of your heart shapes your mind, making you less able to trust, less able to believe some things, less able to see what's good in others, less able to believe that God is real or that God is good. Hidden hurts of the heart can make you see the whole world through dark colored lenses and hinder your mind's ability to grasp what is bright and beautiful. When you look at yourself, you may believe that you are inferior and worthless. Is that an intellectual thought based on data and proof, or is it an idea that oozed out of a heart wound?

6. *What directs your decisions?*

When you must make a choice about something, do you just make up your mind as you see fit, or do you pray about it first and ask God to lead you? Do you ask yourself, "What guidelines or principles in the Bible can lead me in this decision?" Or do you just try to figure things out on your own without considering Scripture? Your approach to decision-making reveals a lot about your heart. If you're a Christian and someone asks you if prayer and Bible reading are important, you might say, "Yes." But if, in your actual decisions, God is barely a factor, you have a heart problem. Your head may contain some Bible teachings, but if your actual choices are made on your own, then your heart and will are not in touch with God. And when it comes to truly believing Christian teaching, your head will have a hard time holding Christian beliefs over the long term if your heart has a habit of making decisions independently of God.

If you explore your heart motives, you'll understand a lot more about why you think the way you do, why you reject some beliefs, and why you accept other beliefs. The heart has its reasons, and often the conscious mind is not aware of those heart reasons. We must pray that God will give us a heart for him if we want a mind that has knowledge of him.

Inner Light or Darkness

Your deepest inner self, your heart or spirit, is enormously important. The Bible says, "The spirit of man is the lamp of the Lord, searching all his innermost parts" (Proverbs 20:27) God puts a lamp in us, but it's possible for that lamp to be misused or even put out. "Haughty eyes and a proud heart, the lamp of the wicked, are sin" (Proverbs 21:4). There is a huge difference between "the lamp of the wicked" and "the lamp of the Lord." A proud heart is not a heart that shines with God's light. Jesus picks up on this line of thinking and says, "If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!" (Matthew 6:23) If God's light is not shining in your

heart, the light in you is darkness, and it's going to hinder your ability to think rightly. Jesus says, "For out of the heart come evil thoughts" (Matthew 15:19-20). The thoughts follow the heart orientation.

Loving and Knowing

In order to know important truths, and especially to know God rightly, I need a change of heart. In particular, I need to be able to love. We don't always understand how important love is in having accurate knowledge. To really know others, I have to get out of myself and focus on them. If I'm stuck on myself, I can't understand things outside myself, and I can't understand persons outside myself. I'm too focused on me, myself and I to really know what's beyond.

If I see things only in light of how they fit my agenda, I can't see them as they really are. I can see them only as they may affect me. If I'm trapped in my own viewpoint, I can't understand a different viewpoint. I won't even make much effort to understand because I don't love others enough to want to understand their viewpoint.

Loving God and others is crucial for *knowing* God and others. We can really know persons only if we care about them. If I love God, then I want to know how God thinks. I want to know what he's saying to me. I want to know the truths that he reveals. But I need to love him before I care what he says.

The same is true in relating to others. If you really want to understand your husband or wife, you need to love your spouse. A man might say, "I don't understand my wife because men and women are so different and there's no way a man could ever understand a woman." There is a little truth in that: men and women are different, and sometimes one personality is very different from another personality. However, the main obstacle to knowing another person is not that she is so different from you, but that you are unwilling to pay attention long enough and lovingly enough to notice the other person and understand her thoughts and feelings. You can really know another person only if you care. If you have a wife and you really want to know her, that's an expression of love. If you're only interested in what she can do for you, you don't love her well and you won't understand her well. If she's servicing your needs and providing for your wants, you might think she's a good wife, but you still might hardly know the real woman she is. Why not? Because you love what she does for you, but you don't really love her for herself, or know who she is as a unique person designed by God.

Likewise, you might say you love God, and you might be glad that he made the world, gives you food and good health, and takes care of you. As long as God behaves as a good provider and gives you what you want, you might say you love him. But you don't really know him or understand him at all because your heart doesn't desire or love God for who he is. You're not longing to really know him better.

A loving heart opens the mind. This is true of knowing God and others, and it is true of knowing the world around us. Love makes you want to understand the creation and the things God has made. A loving heart does wonders for the mind. Some brilliant minds miss out on much truth because they don't have a heart of love. Some minds are not so brilliant but they have a heart of love, and their minds are, therefore, very alert to things in other people. Maybe you know such people. They're considerate: they consider others, pay attention, and know what's really happening in others. Whether or not they are smart in school, they are "people smart" because they love others: they get their heart in tune with someone else's heart.

Your heart affects how well you can know. This is supremely true in relation to God. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and love your neighbor as

yourself.” As you love, you’ll understand God better and understand your neighbor better. You’ll understand life better. You’ll understand the Bible better. Gospel truths will seem truer, more real, and more understandable than if you’re not a lover of God. Your heart shapes your mind.

Same Seed, Four Soils

In Jesus’ parable of the four soils, he shows that the way we receive God’s Word depends on the condition of our heart. A man goes out to sow his seed. Some of the seed falls on a hard path, and birds come and take it away. Other seed falls on rocky soil that is very shallow. That seed comes up right away because it didn’t go in very deep, but when the weather gets hot and dry, the seed just shrivels up because it lacks root. A third kind of soil has a lot of weeds and thistles in it. Some seed falls there and it comes up, but the weeds and thistles choke it out. The fourth soil is good soil, deep and rich. Some seed falls there and eventually produces 30 and 60 and 100 times as much as was planted.

In this parable, Jesus is talking about different hearts and the way those different hearts receive God’s Word. In each case, the seed is the same. It’s the same word of God, the same gospel, and the same Jesus sowing that gospel and sending out his ambassadors to sow it. However, although the seed is the same, the soils are different.

The *hard* heart doesn’t want to hear God’s truth at all, so Satan and his demons swoop and snatch away it away, like birds snatching away seed before it can take root. With a hard heart, truth goes in one ear and out the other; you forget it almost as soon as you hear it.

The *shallow* heart hears the truth and gets excited about it. But as soon as life gets tough, that rootless belief withers, and God’s Word doesn’t seem true anymore.

The *crowded* heart hears the Word and doesn’t directly reject it but has all sorts of competing things going on. Life’s so busy that it doesn’t leave much room for God’s Word to flourish and grow in the crowded heart. The seed is choked by worries and cares and by the deceitfulness of pleasures. A crowded heart can have two very different kinds of clutter: prosperity and problems. If prosperity crams your heart with pleasures, or if problems crowd your heart with worries, little room remains for God’s Word to grow in you. A crowded, cluttered heart is not a heart that can believe God’s truth in a real and living way.

The *good* heart believes the Word and bears fruit. The good soil represents “those with a noble and good heart” (Luke 8:15) who “hear the word and understand it” (Matthew 13:23). What kind of heart is noble and good? A heart that has been born again through the Holy Spirit of God. God gives a new heart in rebirth, and that new heart has the ability to hear and truly understand the Word. Hard, shallow, and crowded hearts don’t understand the Word deeply. But when the Holy Spirit makes a heart noble and good, then the mind is also able to understand and receive the truth.

Same seed, different soils. That’s the role of the heart in knowing. You cannot know God, you cannot accept his truth, if your heart is not good soil. It takes a new heart to know God.

What Shapes Your Mind?

In this series of three articles, we’ve been exploring what shapes your mind. You are not just a thinking machine. Your beliefs are not just products of a computer-like mind processing data and evidence. Of course, information does shape your mind somewhat, and your mind’s powers of logical reasoning have some impact on what you believe. But you’re not just a computer processing data. Therefore, to move from unbelief to belief in Christian truth, it’s usually not

enough to be presented with more evidence and better arguments. Other things besides logic and evidence shape your mind and influence your beliefs.

- *Your social setting* shapes your mind. The people around you influence how you think and the ideas you find acceptable.
- *Your actions* shape your mind. Your actions affect what you find believable. If you're acting in a bad way, then bad ideas are more likely to seem true to you. If you're acting in line with God's will, then God's truth is going to sound more believable to you.
- *Your heart* shapes your mind. Your beliefs and knowledge depend in many ways on what moves your inner self.

Heart, actions, and social setting are mind-shapers. These three elements work together. A renewed heart, godly actions, and Christian community put your mind in a position to believe more and more of the truth that God reveals. Guard your heart! Live according to the Word of God! Hang out with the people of God! Then your mind will grow in its ability to believe and know God's truth.