

Is a Christian's Heart Deceitful and Desperately Wicked?

Quite some time ago, I was talking with a Calvinist about the heresy of Wesleyan Perfectionism. This Calvinist said, "Perfectionism denies the doctrine of Total Depravity." Although I agreed that Perfectionism is a damnable heresy, I did not understand how this heresy would deny Total Depravity (since Total Depravity is a doctrine about the unsaved, not the saved) and asked for clarification. This Calvinist told me that if a Christian can be totally sinless, then this would mean that the Christian's heart is not totally depraved.

What this Calvinist expressed turned out to be a common Calvinistic view: the first "T" in the acronym "TULIP" not only had to do with the total depravity of the unbeliever; it had to do with the total depravity of the believer! My subsequent research was an eye-opener, to say the least. I found that these Calvinists actually deny the transforming work of the Holy Spirit.

The main passage of Scripture that has come up over and over again when I see Calvinists defend their heresy is Jeremiah 17:9. The most well-known wording is in the KJV: "*The heart [is] deceitful above all [things], and desperately wicked: who can know it?*" (The LITV and YLT translate the Hebrew word *anash* as "incurable" rather than "desperately wicked.")

When I first found out that this passage was being used by people who claimed to know their Bibles to describe saved people, especially those who claimed to believe the doctrines of grace, I was stunned. This is actually a proof-text for the *real* doctrine of Total Depravity, showing clearly that there is nothing but wickedness and deceit in the unbeliever's heart and that the condition of the wicked person's heart is incurable. He is as able to change his heart as the Ethiopian is able to change his skin or the leopard is able to change his spots (Jer. 13:23). All the imagination of the thoughts of his heart are continually evil (Gen. 6:5), even from youth (Gen. 8: 21). Everything he thinks, says, and does – even his kindness, morality, and religion – are dead works, evil deeds, and fruit unto death (Psa. 14:2-3; Prov. 4:19; 10:16,32; 12:5,10; 15:8,9,26,28; 21:4,10,27; Isa. 45:20; 64:6; Mat. 7:18; John 3:19-20; Rom. 1:20-32; 3:9-18; 7:5; 8:5-8; 10:2-3; 1Co.2:14; 2Co. 4:3-4; Eph. 4:18; Col. 1:21). Would anyone dare say that any of these verses are describing believers?

Yet you will read in books and hear in sermons that a believer's heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked. In fact, it is seen as humility to say that one's own heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked.

Jerry Bridges, in *The Pursuit of Holiness*, says this: "Sin is still hostile to God and cannot submit to His law (Rom. 8:7). Thus we have an implacable enemy of righteousness right in our own hearts. First of all the scripture indicates that the seat of indwelling sin is the heart (Mark 7:21-23; Gen 6:5; Luke 6:45). The Bible tells us that the heart is deceitful and unsearchable to any but God alone (Jer. 17:9). And in this unsearchable heart dwells the law of sin. Knowing that indwelling sin occupies a heart that is deceitful and unsearchable should make us extremely wary."

Notice that Bridges uses Romans 8:7 to describe sin in a believer! "*Because the mind of the flesh [is] enmity towards God; for it is not being subjected to the Law of God, for neither can it [be].*" Bridges says that believers have the mind of the flesh that is at enmity toward God and that cannot be subjected to the Law of God! But what does God the Holy Spirit through the apostle Paul say in the

two verses right before verse 7? “*For the ones that are according to flesh mind the things of the flesh. And the ones according to Spirit [mind] the things of the Spirit. For the mind of the flesh [is] death, but the mind of the Spirit [is] life and peace*” (Rom. 8:5-6). And what about the two verses right after verse 7? “*And those being in the flesh are not able to please God. But you are not in flesh, but in Spirit, since [the] Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone has not [the] Spirit of Christ, this one is not His*” (Rom. 8:8-9). The mind of the flesh is death! Those who have the mind of the flesh are enemies of God who cannot please God and who do not have the Spirit of God! What kind of warped thinking is this? Bridges twists the Scripture to his own destruction.

But that was just Jerry Bridges. You wouldn't expect to find it in a book by a preeminent Calvinist Reformed theologian, would you? This might surprise some of you, but the following is from JOHN OWEN.

The title of Owen's treatise is “The Nature, Power, Deceit, and Prevalency of the Remainders of Indwelling Sin in Believers Together with the Ways of its Working and Means of Prevention, Opened, Evinced, and Applied with a Resolution of Sundry Cases of Conscience Thereunto Appertaining.” Owen is talking about believers here. The following is an excerpt from Chapter III, entitled “The seat or subject of the law of sin, the heart – What meant thereby – Properties of the heart as possessed by sin, unsearchable, deceitful – Whence that deceit ariseth – Improvement of these considerations”:

“This is the subject, the seat, the dwelling-place of this law of sin, – the heart; as it is the entire principle of moral operations, of doing good or evil, as out of it proceed good or evil. Here dwells our enemy; this is the fort, the citadel of this tyrant, where it maintains a rebellion against God all our days. Sometimes it hath more strength, and consequently more success; sometimes less of the one and of the other; but it is always in rebellion whilst we live.

“That we may in our passage take a little view of the strength and power of sin from this seat and subject of it, we may consider one or two properties of the heart that exceedingly contribute thereunto. It is like an enemy in war, whose strength and power lie not only in his numbers and force of men or arms, but also in the unconquerable forts that he doth possess. And such is the heart to this enemy of God and our souls; as will appear from the properties of it, whereof one or two shall be mentioned. ...

“1. It is *unsearchable*: Jeremiah 17:9, 10, ‘Who can know the heart? I the Lord search it.’ ... In this unsearchable heart dwells the law of sin; and much of its security, and consequently of its strength, lies in this, that it is past our finding out. We fight with an enemy whose secret strength we cannot discover, whom we cannot follow into its retirements. Hence, oftentimes, when we are ready to think sin quite ruined, after a while we find it was but out of sight. It hath coverts and retreats in an unsearchable heart, whither we cannot pursue it. ...

“2. As it is unsearchable, so it is *deceitful*, as in the place above mentioned: ‘It is deceitful above all things,’ — incomparably so. ... Now, incomparable deceitfulness, added to unsearchableness, gives a great addition and increase of strength to the law of sin, upon the account of its seat and subject. I

speak not yet of the deceitfulness of sin itself, but the deceitfulness of the heart where it is seated. Prov. xxvi. 25, 'There are seven abominations in the heart;' that is, not only many, but an absolute complete number, as seven denotes. And they are such abominations as consist in deceitfulness; so the caution foregoing insinuates, 'Trust him not:' for it is only deceit that should make us not to trust in that degree and measure which the object is capable of.

"Now, this deceitfulness of the heart, whereby it is exceedingly advantaged in its harboring of sin, lies chiefly in these two things: —

"(1.) That it abounds in *contradictions*, so that it is not to be found and dealt withal according to any constant rule and way of procedure. ... The frame of the heart is ready to contradict itself every moment. Now you would think you had it all for such a frame, such a way; anon it is quite otherwise: so that none know what to expect from it. The rise of this is the disorder that is brought upon all its faculties by sin. ... This, I say, makes the heart deceitful above all things: it agrees not at all in itself, is not constant to itself, hath no order that it is constant unto, is under no certain conduct that is stable; but, if I may so say, hath a rotation in itself, where oftentimes the feet lead and guide the whole.

"(2.) Its deceit lies in its *full promisings* upon the first appearance of things; and this also proceeds from the same principle with the former. ... Now, add this deceitfulness to the unsearchableness before mentioned, and we shall find that at least the difficulty of dealing effectually with sin in its seat and throne will be exceedingly increased. A deceiving and a deceived heart, who can deal with it? — especially considering that the heart employs all its deceits unto the service of sin, contributes them all to its furtherance. All the disorder that is in the heart, all its false promises and fair appearances, promote the interest and advantages of sin. Hence God cautions the people to look to it, lest their own hearts should entice and deceive them.

"Who can mention the treacheries and deceits that lie in the heart of man? It is not for nothing that the Holy Ghost so expresseth it, 'It is deceitful above all things,' — uncertain in what it doth, and false in what it promiseth. ...

"Secondly, Hath it its residence in that which is *various, inconstant, deceitful* above all things? This calls for perpetual watchfulness against it. An open enemy, that deals by violence only, always gives some respite. You know where to have him and what he is doing, so as that sometimes you may sleep quietly without fear. But against adversaries that deal by deceit and treachery (which are long swords, and reach at the greatest distance) nothing will give security but perpetual watchfulness. It is impossible we should in this case be too jealous, doubtful, suspicious, or watchful. The heart hath a thousand wiles and deceits; and if we are in the least off from our watch, we may, be sure to be surprised. Hence are those reiterated commands and cautions given for watching, for being circumspect, diligent, careful, and the like. There is no living for them who have to deal with an enemy deceitful above all things, unless they persist in such a frame. ...

"'Search me, O God, and try me.' As if he had said, 'It is but a little that I know of my deceitful heart, only I would be *sincere*; I would not have reserves for sin retained therein. ...'"

This is absolutely amazing. John Owen believed and taught that the heart of a believer is his enemy, is deceitful and deceived, is full of abominations, does not have a constant order or stable conduct, serves sin, promises falsehood, and has a thousand wives and deceits, and believers should thus be doubtful and suspicious of what is in their hearts. He even said that David, at the end of Psalm 139, is telling God that “[i]t is but a little that I know of my deceitful heart”!

Here are two quotes from John Brown of Haddington (quoted in Joel Beeke’s *Puritan Reformed Spirituality*): “My life has been a kind of almost perpetual strife between God and my soul. He strives to overcome my enmity and wickedness with his mercies, and I strive to overcome his mercy with my enmity and wickedness. Astonishingly kind on his side, but worse than diabolically wicked on mine! After all, I wish and hope that he, not I, may obtain the victory at last.” “I know the outrageous wickedness of my heart; such wickedness as would have provoked any but a God of infinite love to have cast me into hell.”

John Brown was not even certain that God would be victorious in overcoming his diabolically wicked soul. He believed that his heart was outrageously wicked and would have provoked God’s wrath if God were not a God of infinite love.

Those of us who are familiar with Reformed theology should not be surprised. One of the bedrock documents of Reformed theology, the heretical and immoral Westminster Confession of Faith, says that God sometimes leaves His children “to the corruption of their own hearts, ... to discover unto them the ... deceitfulness of their hearts, that they may be humbled.” (Note that this fits right in with experience-based religion.)

And here is a quote from the Memoirs of Jonathan Edwards: “Often, since I lived in this town, I have had very affecting views of my own sinfulness and vileness: very frequently to such a degree, as to hold me in a kind of loud weeping, sometimes for a considerable time together: so that I have often been forced to shut myself up. I have had a vastly greater sense of my own wickedness, and the badness of my heart, than ever I had before my conversion. ... When others, that have come to talk with me about the soul-concerns, have expressed the sense they have had of their own wickedness, by saying, that it seemed to them, that they were as bad as the devil himself; I thought their expressions seemed exceedingly faint and feeble, to represent my wickedness. ... When I look into my heart, and take a view of my wickedness, it looks like an abyss, infinitely deeper than hell. ... I have greatly longed of late for a broken heart, and to lie low before God; and, when I ask for humility, I cannot bear the thoughts of being no more humble than other Christians. It seems to me, that though their degrees of humility may be suitable for them, yet it would be a vile self-exaltation in me, not to be the lowest in humility of all mankind. ... And it is affecting to think, how ignorant I was, when a young Christian, of the bottomless, infinite depths of wickedness, pride, hypocrisy, and deceit, left in my heart.”

This is pride at its most sickening, in the guise of humility, seeking to exalt self by being “more humble” than everyone else. And Edwards would dare say that this (supposedly) new heart that God gave him is infinitely wicked and hypocritical and deceitful.

Contrary to the pseudo-humble, pseudo-pious babbling, here is what God says about the heart of the believer: “*And I will also give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit within you. And I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give to you a heart of flesh. And I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you shall keep My judgments and do [them]*” (Ezek. 36:26-27).

That *deceitful* and *incurable* heart is that *stony heart* that is *taken away* and is *replaced* by a *heart of flesh*! The Holy Spirit gives His people a NEW HEART and causes them to walk in obedience!

And not only is the heart new, EVERYTHING is new. The regenerated person is a NEW CREATION: *So that if anyone [is] in Christ, [he] is a new creation; the old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new* (2Co. 5:17).

The *old things* include the *old heart*. It is GONE. The Holy Spirit makes a person anew! There is a GREAT CHANGE that has taken place! To say that the heart of a believer remains deceitful and incurably wicked is to deny the transforming work of the Holy Spirit!

Does the Christian still sin? He most certainly does. Indwelling sin is still constantly with him to harass him make him do what he does not want to do, to the point of making him cry out that he is afflicted, distressed, grieved, and vexed (Rom. 7:14-24). But he even sins differently than the wicked. The sin of the wicked comes from their totally depraved hearts. The sin of believers comes from the principle of sin dwelling in them. Believers hate their sin (Rom. 7:15). They have died to sin, do not live in sin, no longer serve sin, are no longer under the dominion of sin, have been set free from sin, do not walk according to the flesh, are free from the law of sin, and are not in the flesh (Rom. 6:2,6,11,14,22;8:1,2,4,9).

This also runs contrary to those who say they that Christians are still adulterers and idolaters but are declared righteous, so they will inherit the kingdom of heaven. Some say, “We’re all adulterers, but we’re covered by the blood.” They say that the only difference between Christians and non-Christian adulterers is that one is declared righteous and the other is not. 1 Corinthians 6:11 says, “*And some [of you] WERE these things ...*” One verse before this (as well as Galatians 5:21), God says that NONE of these kinds of people will inherit the kingdom of God.

In addition, it runs contrary to those who say that Christians are still self-righteous or legalists or that Christians can still believe or confess a false gospel or follow a false Christ. Scriptures such as Matthew 24:23-24, Luke 6:43-45, John 10:5, Romans 10:3, Galatians 5:2, 2 Thessalonians 2:3-17, and 2 John 9 smash these notions to bits.

Which do you believe? Has God worked a great change in you by making you a new creation with a new heart, or is your heart still vile and deceitful? One thing is for sure: if you believe that your heart is vile and deceitful, then it most certainly is.

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