

Equipping Hour: Feb. 22

Feb. 22: The Dynamic Heart (pt2)

Last week we began with a question:

What do you genuinely delight in?

Not what you believe in. Not what you agree with. But what actually brings you joy, shapes your choices, and captures your attention. We talked about the theological tug-of-war. Some camps are drawn to the powerful emotive expressions of delight, but these are often experiential rather than transformative, meaning they struggle to sustain lasting change. Other camps are drawn to cognitive expressions of delight, meaning a deep theological knowledge and insight that helps them with the right answers but does little to poke or stir the deepest recesses of the heart. It doesn't necessary "move" and "shake" them in all areas of the heart where lasting transformation actually takes place.

We are aiming for the middle of this tug-of-war, where knowing God better makes for a profound and lasting change, where knowledge and mystery are friends, not rivals, where knowing the love of God is the very thing that makes us loving, where sensing the desirability of God alters our preferences and inclinations, and we begin to want God more and more and more than anything else. This delight goes beyond intellectual and experiential. It impacts everything, provides assurances, shapes holiness, and transforms the very way we look at and interact with the world around us. The target for this delight is the heart.

Last week we answered the question, why is the heart such a big deal to God? Because the heart governs the whole person. The heart is decisive and directional. Again, this is a refresher from last week. If I set my heart towards something, or away from something, that's where I will move with all my being. If I set my heart towards the righteousness of Jesus Christ, that's the direction I will move. If I set my heart towards sinful enticements, I will move towards sin again and again and again.

So the question becomes, where is my heart set? And how does the gospel, at the heart level, change my trajectory? Applying this at the deepest level means understanding what Scripture means when it says heart. When Jesus summarized the greatest commandment as loving God with all your heart, soul, and mind, He made this a comprehensive target of what makes you, you. Loving God doesn't just involve your heart. It's doesn't just involve your mind. It doesn't just involve your soul. Loving God means you have been captivated and captured by God's awesomeness in all control areas. Remember that Scripture shows us that the heart functions in three interconnected ways.

First, the heart thinks. This is the cognitive function. We are always interpreting reality, forming beliefs about God, ourselves, and the world.

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Second, the heart desires. This is the affective function. Our loves, fears, joys, and longings flow from what we treasure.

Third, the heart chooses. This is the volitional function. We make commitments, decisions, and directional choices based on what we believe and desire. Every moment of life is a heart moment—thinking, wanting, and choosing before God because only God can see our hearts. All of it.

Last week we established that the heart is the immaterial control center of life. Everything flows downstream from it—our words, reactions, desires, and decisions.

Proverbs 4:23

Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life.

Today, we slow down and examine one dynamic function of the heart: the cognitive heart—the thinking, believing, interpreting dimension of who we are.

The heart is always interpreting reality. Much of what we have covered in this worldview class has centered on the various lens we use to make sense of the world around us. How we interpret, meaning what we think, is not neutral: it reflects trust, worship, and allegiance. Spiritual growth requires identifying and renewing the beliefs that shape our experience.

Here is something foundational: You do not respond directly to events. You respond to what you believe about events.

Two people can experience the same circumstance and walk away with entirely different emotional responses and behavioral outcomes. Why? Because the heart is always interpreting. For instance:

Several years ago, in a suburban intersection accident, two drivers collided while one was making a left turn and the other was proceeding straight through a yellow light. Two witnesses were interviewed. Witness one had been stopped at the light in the opposite direction. From her angle, she saw the turning driver begin moving while the light was still changing. Her immediate thought was, “That car tried to rush the turn.” She later testified that the turning driver seemed impatient and went too quickly.

Witness two was walking on the sidewalk slightly down the block. From his vantage point, he clearly saw the straight-moving car accelerate as the light turned yellow. His interpretation was, “That driver sped up to beat the light.” He testified that the straight driver seemed aggressive. Both witnesses were credible. Neither had anything to gain or lose. Both were confident. But their position, attention, and assumptions shaped what they noticed and how they interpreted it. One focused on the turning car’s movement. One focused on the accelerating car. One interpreted urgency. One interpreted aggression.

Investigators later concluded that both drivers likely contributed to the crash — one misjudged timing, the other increased speed late. Two honest observers experienced the same event. They noticed different details. They interpreted motive differently. And their interpretations ascribed a particular conclusion.

This example is helpful because in this case no one is clearly malicious. Both interpretations were plausible. Both were shaped by limited perspective. Both people felt emotionally compelled to be witnesses having observed the crash.

This is exactly how the cognitive heart operates in daily life. We do not merely record events like cameras. We select details. We assign meaning. We infer motive. We fill in gaps. And once we assign meaning, our emotions and responses follow naturally.

Two people can walk away convinced they are right — not because one is evil, but because each heart interpreted the event through a particular lens. The cognitive heart is not only about facts. It is about meaning-making. Now imagine this isn't a traffic accident. Imagine it's a tense conversation in your home. Or a comment made in a meeting. Or a tone in a text message. How about this:

A husband comes home from work after a long day. He walks in quietly, sets his bag down, and heads to the kitchen without saying much. His wife has also had a full day—managing work, errands, and the kids. She greets him and says, “Hey, can you help me with dinner and the homework situation? It's been a little crazy.” He exhales and says, “Can I just have a few minutes?” That's the entire event. Nothing dramatic. No raised voices. No harsh words. But here's what happens internally.

She notices the exhale. She recognizes a tone. In her heart, she interprets: “I didn't get a few minutes. He doesn't see how hard today has been for me. I'm carrying this alone.” Her belief forms quickly: I am unsupported. As that interpretation settles in, her emotions follow:

- Hurt
- Frustration
- Maybe resentment

Her response shifts. She becomes quieter. Shorter in tone. Less warm. Dinner feels tense.

But this is how he interprets things. The husband walks in already mentally exhausted. His request for “a few minutes” wasn't withdrawal—it was survival. In his heart, he interprets: “I need a moment to transition. If I jump in immediately, I'm going to snap. I'm trying to keep peace.”

Then he notices her change in tone and demeanor. And his interpretation forms: “She's upset with me. She's being unreasonable. Nothing I do is enough for her.” His belief settles: She is impossible to please.

His emotions follow:

- Defensiveness
- Discouragement
- Distance

Now he withdraws further—not because he doesn’t care, but because he feels defeated.

But what actually happened? The observable event was simple: A tired wife asks her husband for help, and a tired husband asked for a few minutes. But internally she interpreted lack of support. Perhaps this was her experiences. He interpreted impending criticism. Perhaps this was his experience. But neither spouse is malicious (hopefully). Neither is intentionally deceptive (hopefully). Both interpretations feel true from the inside. But both are responding not to the event itself—they are responding to what they believe the event means.

The cognitive heart:

- Assigns meaning
- Infers motive
- Draws conclusions
- Makes judgments about reality

Those beliefs then immediately impact the rest of the dynamic heart, the emotions and choices. In this example, the distance in that kitchen did not begin with harsh words. It began with interpretation. If her belief had been: “He’s exhausted and wants to show up well.” Her emotional response changes. If his belief had been: “She’s overwhelmed and reaching for help.” His response softens. Same moment. Different meanings. Different outcomes. Most marital tension does not begin with cruelty. It begins with interpretation.

And once the heart assigns meaning, emotions and reactions feel completely justified. Remember that the cognitive heart is not neutral; it’s constantly deciding what is true, what is threatening, and what this moment means because the cognitive heart constantly asks:

What is happening?

Why is it happening?

What does this say about God?

What does this say about me?

We answer most of these questions in a split second. Almost like they are automatic. And that’s a problem when they are misaligned, misinterpreted, or just plain missing the real issue. Over time patterns emerge until they are eventually deep ruts that feel more like prisons of the mind. These interpretations shape everything that follows.

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Again, we too often treat belief as neutral, as though it were simply mental data storage. Scripture does not treat belief that way.

Romans 10:10 says:

With the heart one believes and is justified.

Belief is not described as merely intellectual acknowledgment. It is personal, relational trust rooted in the heart.

Hebrews 3:12 warns:

Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.

Notice that unbelief is moral. It is directional. It leads. It reflects misplaced trust.

Ephesians 4:17-24

Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. ¹⁸ They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. ¹⁹ They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. ²⁰ But that is not the way you learned Christ!— ²¹ assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, ²² to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, ²³ and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, ²⁴ and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

Notice how Scripture reveals that thinking shapes identity. It shapes direction. The cognitive heart is not merely processing information; it is forming interpretations rooted in allegiance. At every moment, your heart is deciding who or what is reliable. It is determining what and who defines reality. It is choosing where to place confidence. Belief is not passive. It is worshipful. It reveals in whom you trust.

To understand the cognitive heart, we must really need to understand that we never experience life unfiltered. We experience life through interpretation. Genesis 3 gives us the clearest example. The serpent does not begin by attacking Eve's behavior or feelings. He attacks her interpretation, her beliefs.

Genesis 3:1-2

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden'?"

Eve begins reconsidering:

- Is God trustworthy?

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- Is He withholding something good?
- Is obedience restrictive rather than protective?

The fruit did not change. God's command did not change. What changed was her interpretation of God and His word. Once her belief shifted, her desire and decision followed.

Genesis 3:6

When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate...

This tactic, from the enemy, hasn't changed much. If it ain't broke...

Now consider Psalm 73. Asaph observes the prosperity of the wicked and interprets it as injustice. He concludes that faithfulness has been in vain. His interpretation leads to discouragement and near despair. But when he enters the sanctuary of God, his perspective shifts. His circumstances have not changed—but his interpretation has. He sees their end. He sees God's sovereignty. He sees reality rightly. As his interpretation changes, his emotional and spiritual stability returns. This is the power of the cognitive heart. Here's what the Apostle Paul had to say about it.

2 Corinthians 10:4-5

For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. ⁵ We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ...

Thoughts are not incidental. They are spiritually significant because there's a war going on for control of your heart. And as Paul points out, we destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God with weapons of divine power. Not our power. God's truth, which is powerful when applied to our interpretations, our thoughts, our lens. We are not victims. Rather, we need to actively take our thoughts captive to ensure our allegiance is to the reality God declares, not some cheap substitute we conjure through worldly influences.

Beliefs reveal our allegiances. Scripture says so. Jeremiah 17 paints a vivid contrast:

Jeremiah 17:5-8

Thus says the Lord: "Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart turns away from the Lord. ⁶ He is like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see any good come. He shall dwell in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land. ⁷ "Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. ⁸ He is like a tree planted by water, that sends out its roots by the stream, and does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green, and is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit."

The difference between the shrub and the tree isn't intelligence. It is allegiance. The cognitive heart is always trusting something or someone. Even unbelief is not the absence of belief—it is belief redirected toward something else. Let's look at some examples:

Fear and Control

A person says, "I know God is sovereign," but lives in constant worry about the future. What's happening? Unbelief is not a lack of awareness of God's sovereignty. It is trust redirected toward personal control. The heart believes, "If I don't manage this perfectly, everything will fall apart." The belief hasn't disappeared—it has shifted from God's rule to self-management.

Bitterness and Justice

Someone is deeply wronged and says, "I just can't let this go." Unbelief here is not denial of God's justice. It is belief redirected toward personal vindication. The heart believes, "If I don't hold onto this, justice won't be done." Instead of trusting God as righteous judge, the person trusts his or her own ability to secure fairness.

People-Pleasing

A Christian knows God's approval is secure in Christ, yet constantly fears disappointing others. Unbelief is not the absence of belief in grace. It is belief redirected toward human approval. The heart believes, "My security depends on what they think of me." Trust has shifted from God's verdict to human opinion.

Material Security

A person confesses that God provides, yet obsessively accumulates money. Unbelief is not ignorance of God's provision. It is belief redirected toward financial security. The heart believes, "Safety comes from what I can store." Trust has moved from God's care to accumulated resources.

Anger and Threat

Someone erupts in anger when criticized. Unbelief here is not the denial that God is sovereign. It is belief redirected toward self-protection. The heart believes, "This criticism threatens my worth. I must defend myself." Instead of resting in identity secured by Christ, the person trusts reputation management.

Despair and Identity

A believer fails morally and concludes, "I'll never change." Unbelief is not the rejection of the gospel intellectually. It is belief redirected toward past performance as ultimate truth. The heart believes, "My failure defines me more than Christ does." Trust has shifted from Christ's finished work to personal track record.

In every case, the heart is still believing. The heart is still trusting. The heart is still interpreting. Unbelief is not emptiness; it is substitution. It's believing, trusting, and

interpreting wrongly. The cognitive heart always anchors somewhere. The question is never, “Will I believe?” The question is, “What or whom will I trust here and now?”

Romans 1:21–25 tells us humanity “exchanged the truth of God for a lie.” That exchange is cognitive, but it is also worshipful. It reflects a shift in trust and allegiance, not a lack of information. Exchange. That’s kind of important. Stew in that for a moment. In what ways have you exchanged the truth of God for a lie? Perhaps it’s not the example Paul uses in Romans 1, but I guarantee you, each of us has at least one. A lie about who we are, about a relationship, about suffering or God’s will. At least one lie we are clinging to even though we know the biblical truth.

Jesus makes this connection clear in John 8:31–32:

John 8:31-32

“If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

Knowing the truth is a function of the cognitive heart that has received and continues to receive God’s word. That’s what abiding is. It’s not intellectual knowledge. Freedom is not produced by stronger willpower. It is produced by truth embraced at the cognitive heart level. When the cognitive heart is anchored in truth, the entire person begins to experience freedom. If distorted interpretations shape your experience, and I promise they do, then renewal must begin with belief. Romans 12:2 says that transformation flows from renewal. Change happens as the thinking heart is reshaped.

Renewal is not mere information accumulation. It is recalibration. It is receiving the presences of the Holy Spirit into all the various crevices of the cognitive heart and using Scripture to reshape how we interpret suffering, success, rejection, security, identity, and control. It’s about confronting the innumerable ways we express unbelief in God, not in a sense of rejecting salvation but in rejecting the freedom He comes to offer, by rejecting to love Him in this or that area of life, this or that belief, this or that interpretation.

One of the most helpful insights in understanding the cognitive heart, from Jeremy Pierre, is the concept of controlling beliefs. Controlling beliefs are the interpretive conclusions we hold that function as ruling assumptions about God, ourselves, and the world. They are not fleeting thoughts. They are settled judgments. They are the “this is just the way it is” convictions that quietly steer our reactions, relationships, and emotional patterns.

They answer questions like:

- What must I have in order to be okay?
- What can I not afford to lose?
- What does this situation really mean?
- Who or what ultimately determines my safety and worth?

These beliefs sit beneath surface emotions. If a controlling belief says, “I must be respected to be secure,” then criticism will feel catastrophic. If it says, “God is distant when I fail,” then sin will lead to hiding rather than repentance. If it says, “I am on my own,” then fear will dominate every uncertain circumstance. In each case, the emotional reaction makes sense—given the belief underneath it.

This is why renewing the cognitive heart is so essential. Behavior modification cannot reach controlling beliefs. Emotional regulation techniques alone cannot uproot them. They must be exposed, examined, and replaced with truth through an act of submission. The Holy Spirit does not merely comfort feelings; He confronts interpretations.

Through Scripture, the Spirit asks:

- Is that really who God is?
- Is that truly what this situation means?
- Is that actually what determines your identity?

Distorted controlling beliefs are often rooted in partial truths elevated to ultimate status. They feel plausible because they contain fragments of reality. But they are misaligned with God’s full revelation. Renewal happens as these beliefs are brought into the light. The Spirit patiently dismantles false assumptions and rebuilds conviction around what God has actually said.

- God is not distant; He is present.
- Security is not earned; it is granted in Christ.
- Suffering is not meaningless; it is governed by providence.
- Identity is not fragile; it is anchored in union with Christ.

As controlling beliefs change, emotional life follows. Fear loses its fuel. Bitterness loses its justification. Pride loses its scaffolding. The heart begins to respond to life according to reality as God defines it—not according to assumptions formed in pain, culture, or self-protection. Spiritual maturity is not merely learning more verses. It is inviting and receiving God’s truth to reshape the beliefs that govern our interpretation of everything.

When the cognitive heart is renewed at the level of controlling beliefs:

- We do not just act differently—we perceive differently.
- We do not just suppress fear—we reinterpret uncertainty.
- We do not just forgive—we re-understand offense in light of grace.
- We do not just surrender control—we redefine what control actually means.

The battle is never at the level of circumstances. Circumstances are important, but they cannot determine. The battle is always at the level of interpretation. And interpretation flows from belief. The good news is that controlling beliefs are not permanent fixtures. They are transformable. As truth is repeatedly embraced, rehearsed, and trusted, the heart’s governing assumptions are slowly reformed. And when the assumptions change, the entire

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emotional and relational landscape begins to change with them. This is the deep work of renewal by the Holy Spirit.

Colossians 3:2 commands us to “set your minds on things above.” That is not escapism. It is anchoring our interpretation of earthly realities in heavenly truth, heavenly thinking, heavenly interpretations.

Philippians 4:8

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

When the cognitive heart is renewed, the lens through which we read our lives is recalibrated. What once felt threatening is reframed under the steady light of God’s character. What once seemed chaotic is now seen as governed by His control. Renewal at this level reshapes not only what we feel, but how we understand.

Fear begins to yield to trust because the mind no longer exaggerates danger or minimizes God. The renewed heart remembers who sits on the throne. It recognizes that uncertainty is not the same as abandonment, and that vulnerability does not mean exposure outside of divine care. Trust grows not from denial of difficulty, but from a clearer vision of God’s nearness within it.

Fear gives way to confidence in God’s sovereignty because the narrative shifts. Instead of assuming that outcomes rest solely on fragile human control, the renewed heart rests in His presence. The future is no longer a looming threat but a field already known to God. Planning still happens. Responsibility remains. But the crushing burden of ultimate control is lifted, replaced with steady reliance.

Bitterness softens under the weight of grace because the renewed mind no longer rehearses injury as identity. It begins to see wounds within the larger story of redemption. Grace reframes offense—not by denying injustice, but by locating it beneath the cross. The heart that has been deeply forgiven finds it increasingly difficult to cling tightly to resentment. Mercy loosens the grip of memory.

Self-protection diminishes as trust deepens because the renewed heart no longer believes that survival depends on constant guarding. Walls built from past hurt begin to lower. Transparency becomes less terrifying. Love becomes less calculated. When identity is secured in Christ rather than performance or approval, defensive reflexes lose their urgency.

The Spirit uses truth to expose distorted interpretations and replace them with reality as God defines it. Lies that once sounded authoritative—“You are alone,” “You must control everything,” “You will never change,” “They are your enemy”—are brought into the light.

Scripture does not merely inform; it corrects perception so that your directional heart pulls towards God instead of away. It teaches the heart to see as heaven sees. Over time, new healthy ruts of belief are formed—not through self-effort, but through repeated surrender to truth.

This renewal is ongoing. The fancy term is progressive sanctification, becoming more like Christ. It is often slow, layered, and cyclical. But as truth takes root, emotional life stabilizes. Reactions transform into responses. Impulses yield to discernment. And beneath the surface of everyday experience, a quiet confidence grows: God is trustworthy, His grace is sufficient, and His interpretation of reality is the truest one. That is the transformation of the cognitive heart—not the removal of struggle, but the redemption of perception.

This morning we have focused on the thinking heart. But it does not function in isolation. What you believe shapes what you desire. What you believe directs what you choose. If the cognitive heart is distorted, the affective heart will crave wrongly, and the volitional heart will choose poorly. When belief is anchored in truth, desires begin to realign and choices begin to change. Next week we will look at the affective heart, the desiring heart. The heart is dynamic, which means distorted desires will impact your beliefs and choices, just like distorted beliefs impact desires and choices.

Spiritual growth, then, is not about doing better. It is about believing rightly. It's "Lord, I believe! Help my unbelief!" Lord, show me other areas of my heart where my unbelief needs to die, where my heart needs to be directed towards you rather than away. It is about learning to interpret life through the character and promises of God. Your heart is always thinking. Your interpretations are never neutral. And Christ intends to renew how you see everything. God wants your cognitive heart. It a huge part of what it means to be in right relationship with Him. I'll leave you with a question to ponder this week:

What are some beliefs I cling to that need renewal?