

# Understanding and Encouraging Heart Change

## Article

The Bible talks about God removing our heart of stone and replacing it with a heart of flesh (Ezek. 36:26). In Psalm 51:10, the psalmist writes, “Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me” (NIV).

When we become believers in Christ, the Holy Spirit comes to live in us—in our hearts—and through the Holy Spirit we become new creatures. “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (2 Cor. 5:17 ESV). When we become new creatures, our hearts are changed to where our desires are inclined toward the Lord and our desires are less focused on increasingly distant selfish, worldly things.

You have probably seen someone who was transformed so completely that you could scarcely believe he or she was the same person you once knew. I have a friend who, in his youth, joined a terrorist organization, was filled with hate, and sought to harm and even murder those he considered the “enemy.” This foul-mouthed, fire-breathing hatemonger is now a mild-mannered, soft-spoken, godly discipler of men. God changed him; in particular, God changed his heart. I’d known him for a year or two when someone told me about his past; I simply could not believe it. There is no way, I thought, that the person I knew could act the way he was described. The Bible is full of examples of heart change. Saul (renamed Paul) is a perfect example alongside my friend. Paul went from being filled with zealous hatred toward Christians to becoming the most successful missionary of all time. Jesus changed Paul’s heart, and all of Paul’s natural gifts and skills were combined with God’s anointing to turn him into one of the most important and successful men who ever lived.



For parents, it is easy to lose heart when we watch our children show such selfishness and often anger at any moment they think something is “not fair” toward them. They can hit, bite, and bully other kids and fight against their parents’ authority. Through careful application of discipline, this behavior can often be controlled, but then parents can be surprised at how often it returns in certain circumstances.

There is a difference between compelling a certain behavior through consistent discipline and seeing behavior changed due to a new motivation of the heart. The first may allow a parent accompanying a child to rest easy in public; the second will allow for a lifetime of growth guided by the Holy Spirit.

Our children do need to understand and respect authority—the authority of God and the authority of their parents. But as parents we are called to use our authority not just to require good behavior, but to point our children to the ultimate authority, God. We are called to nurture their love and understanding of God and His plan for their lives. We are called to help them develop a godly character that will help them become more and more like Jesus as they grow up. We are called to surround our children with godly examples, while we prepare them for challenging situations.



In short, we are called as parents to equip our children for the most important decision they will ever make: will they trust Jesus Christ for their salvation and surrender their lives for God to work through them in whatever role God has planned for them.

Many parents think that if they can lead their child to say “the sinner’s prayer” their work is done. With children, it is never easy to know how sincere they are or whether they fully understand the implications. Our job is to help our children grow in their understanding and to continue to equip them, encourage them, challenge them, and, in particular, show them by example how to become devoted followers of Jesus.

Every child is different. God has made each child unique, and He has a purpose for each child. As parents, we must be willing to take the time to understand how God has “wired” each child and to help the child develop God-given gifts and become a person of great character. As a child’s heart begins to change, parents will see areas that require deeper engagement to encourage continued growth and learning.

In today’s society, it is common for parents to expend an enormous amount of energy and resources on developing their child’s academic skills, considering the right schools and the best universities. Likewise, many parents of children with athletic ability provide significant opportunities to maximize their potential. Another parent might notice a great musical passion and help that child fully develop that gift.

While these may be worthwhile pursuits, what will be accomplished if our child becomes successful by the world’s standards but has a faulty character or is living outside of God’s desire? A quick look at the entertainment industry or many of our sports “idols” will demonstrate the heart-ache and devastation that can be caused by worldly success outside of God’s provision.

While it is God who is ultimately responsible for changing the hearts of our children, as parents we can do our part to prepare our children for God’s work to be complete. Another way to say it is that God will light the fire, but we can pile up lots of kindling so the fire can burn bright!

When we see a child whose heart has truly been changed, and we see how that child begins to love God and then live out that love by the way he or she treats family, friends, and those in need, it is a beautiful sight. That child becomes teachable in so many ways and will accept our authority as parents because he or she respects God’s authority personally.

More important, that child will grow up, perhaps go to college, and begin a career with God as guide, able to discern God’s will, and resist the worldly pressures that can lead to destruction.



*As you work through the resources in this section on heart change, pray that your child’s heart be changed, but also that your heart will continue to change. Pray that God will empower you with wisdom and grace to be a godly example for your child.*