

## “Self-Awareness Expands Goodness”

*Jeremiah 17:5-10, Psalm 1 & Luke 6:17-26*

Pastor James York

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**Prayer for Understanding** Eternal Spirit, you flow through the ages from the pages of Scripture, healing with your comfort, transforming with your challenge and inspiring to love extravagantly. Open us to perceive you. We pray in the name of the Living Word. Amen.

My spiritual director taught that I need enough legalism to strive to do good and enough grace to not beat myself up. All three of our scriptures seek to motivate us using legalism and grace, carrots and sticks. Carrot motivation uses incentives and stick motivation uses consequences. Jesus taught blessings and woes, joys, and sorrows. The prophets and psalmist expressed it as a fruit bearing tree by a stream and worthless chaff being blown around by the wind. The purpose of all these approaches is the same to motivate us to strive to love and create goodness.

Before we hear from the prophet Jeremiah, it is insightful to understand the definition of heart in Old Testament times. The heart is the center of emotions, desires, and feelings and is the nexus of all our thinking, intentions, and will. The heart seeks to satisfy one's needs. The heart is a person's spiritual core that produces character, forms motivations, and makes decisions. So, when Jeremiah says, heart, he is talking about thoughts, feelings, needs, and choices.

The prophet Jeremiah proclaims: **Jeremiah 17:5-10 NLT** “**This is what the Lord says: “Cursed are those who put their trust in mere humans, who rely on human strength and turn their hearts away from the Lord. They are like stunted shrubs in the desert, with no hope for the future. They will live in the barren wilderness, in an uninhabited salty land. But blessed are those who trust in the Lord and have made the Lord their hope and confidence. They are like trees planted along a riverbank, with roots that reach deep into the water. Such trees are not bothered by the heat or worried by long months of drought. Their leaves stay green, and they never stop producing fruit. “The human heart is the most deceitful of all things, and desperately wicked. Who really knows how bad it is? But I, the Lord, search all hearts and examine secret motives. I give all people their due rewards, according to what their actions deserve.”**

**The human heart is the most deceitful of all things, and desperately wicked.** Self awareness is critical. Without self-awareness, one likely becomes selfish, failing to love others. Without self-awareness, one can justify all sorts of hurtful behavior. It is easy to become delusional perceiving one's perspective as right and all other perspective's as wrong. Delusional that fear and hate is prevailing over love and community. Without self-awareness of one's thoughts, one's perception gets significantly distorted urging actions that are hurtful rather than loving. Without self-awareness we often become self-deceptive justifying unloving behavior. The self-deception is made worse when we listen primarily to people who share similar thoughts and go to suggested websites and social media, because they have algorithms that destroy self-awareness and promote deception. Left unverified, one will convince themselves that they are doing good when they are not and overlook their faults.

There are a myriad of books, podcasts, and resources to help one be self-aware. Recently, I attended a conference hosted by our Presbytery on Nonviolent Communication. It takes empathy to move from violent to nonviolent communication. Nonviolent Communication strives to help one see and understand self and others so we can transform how we speak to ourselves and one another, one empathic conversation at a time. Daily practicing self-empathy enables one to transform themselves and be empathic to others. Empathy is authentic connection. Empathy is presence for what you, or someone else, is feeling and needing. Self-empathy involves observations, beliefs, feelings, needs, and requests. It

is helpful to reflect on your life with authentic connection, self-empathy, both the good and the struggles. Journaling can help. Pick any situation. **Observations:** Consider what you are noticing seeing, hearing, doing, experiencing. What is the catalyst for your thoughts and feelings? **Beliefs:** What are your thoughts? **Feelings:** Most people struggle to identify their feelings and substitute analytic thinking or beliefs for feelings. Print out a feelings list and practice identifying your feelings. **Needs:** We have feelings, pleasant and unpleasant, because we have needs that are met, or not met, so what needs can you connect to your feelings? **Requests:** in light of your needs what requests of yourself, or another, would you like to make. Reach for specificity, something measurable.

Practice self-empathy through observations, beliefs, feelings, needs and requests. Once you have authentic connection with yourself then you can be empathic for another. One way to tell if you are in an empathic state of being is how you are mentally standing. Empathy is standing neutral, curious, not preferring any one way over any other way and aware that there are infinite ways. Empathy is not standing on your front foot attacking or your back foot being defensive. Sometimes we do all this work intuitively. Doing all of this often leads to compassion. Compassion is adding action to empathy. Compassion is ineffective when one is not first empathetic. Compassion requires that you have properly identified the need which is challenging as one does not often even fully understand one's own needs let alone another's. We often confusion wants and needs. So, if you are trying to show compassion and someone is not receiving your compassion then go back and reassess yourself and the need. If you want to learn more, or practice, go to [cnvc.com](http://cnvc.com) or [jengergen.com](http://jengergen.com). Jen is a local guide. Jen hosts monthly gatherings in person and via zoom to learn, refine and practice these tools.

John Gottman, the author of love languages, explains that a predictor of a good relationship is the ability to turn towards a person rather than away. For example, someone walks up to you as you are reading a book and says hello. If you ignore them and continue reading you are turning away. A hurtful turning away is getting angry shouting, "leave me alone". If you acknowledge them, put down the book and have a conversation that is turning toward them. Sometimes one needs to be neutral expressing that you need alone time to recharge, will connect later and keep reading. If one is constantly neutral, or turning away, then the relationship will suffer. Jeremiah has a harsh warning for those who turn away from God. **Cursed are those who turn their hearts away from the Lord.**

The Bible is full of stories of people who discovered how to turn towards God, full of stories of people who misunderstood, lacked empathy and discovered self-awareness, empathy, compassion and love. Reading these stories helps us develop an empathic, authentic connection with God, self and others which enables compassion which enables love expanding goodness. Today's scriptures urge us to be aware of our heart, our feelings, thoughts, needs, so we can strive to love and create goodness.

Jeremiah said: **Jeremiah 17:9-10 MSG "The heart is hopelessly dark and deceitful, a puzzle that no one can figure out. But I, God, search the heart and examine the mind. I get to the heart of the human. I get to the root of things. I treat them as they really are, not as they pretend to be."**

Reading scripture helps us understand ourselves and how we can become a good loving person. The psalmist sings: **Psalm 1 NLT "Oh, the joys of those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or stand around with sinners, or join in with mockers. But they delight in the law of the Lord, meditating on scripture day and night. They are like trees planted along the riverbank, bearing fruit each season. Their leaves never wither, and they prosper in all they do. But not the wicked! They are like worthless chaff, scattered by the wind. They will be condemned at the time of judgment. Sinners will have no place among the godly. For the Lord watches over the path of the godly, but the path of the wicked leads to destruction."**

Meditating on scripture regularly enables us to become a loving person. It takes years for a tree to grow enough to produce fruit. If you watch a fruit tree it would take perhaps a year to be able to see

growth. Likewise, it takes multitudes of turns toward God, towards others, toward self, with empathy to grow, to become a whole, loving person.

The gospel of Luke proclaims: **Luke 6:17-26 NLT** “**When Jesus and the disciples came down from the mountain, they stood on a large, level area, surrounded by many of Jesus’ followers and by the crowds. There were people from all over Judea and from Jerusalem and from as far north as the seacoasts of Tyre and Sidon. They had come to hear Jesus and to be healed of their diseases; and those troubled by unclean spirits were healed. Everyone tried to touch Jesus, because healing power went out from him, and Jesus healed everyone. Then Jesus turned to his disciples and said, “God blesses you who are poor, for the Kingdom of God is yours. God blesses you who are hungry now, for you will be satisfied. God blesses you who weep now, for in due time you will laugh. What blessings await you when people hate you and exclude you and mock you and curse you as evil because you follow the Son of Man. When that happens, be happy! Yes, leap for joy! For a great reward awaits you in heaven. And remember, their ancestors treated the ancient prophets that same way. “What sorrow awaits you who are rich, for you have your only happiness now. What sorrow awaits you who are full and prosperous now, for a time of awful hunger awaits you. What sorrow awaits you who laugh now, for your laughing will turn to mourning and sorrow. What sorrow awaits you who are praised by the crowds, for their ancestors also praised false prophets.”**”

Context is critical. Everyone stood on the level. All people are equal. People came from all over. This is a diverse group of people from various religions, cultures, occupations and politics. An array of people including all genders, orientations and personalities. A varied group of rich and poor, powerful and oppressed. Scripture states. **Jesus healed everyone.** No one was excluded. There were no prerequisites or human actions needed to be healed. Jesus showed pure grace healing everyone. That is the context and on earth one can create more blessings and less woe, more joy and less sorrow by empathy, turning toward, choosing love and expanding goodness.

Homiletics explains the Dorito theory and the deceptive heart. Without self-awareness and empathy, we do stupid things. We are full and we reach for another Dorito and soon the bag is gone. Often one reaches for, chip after chip, not to satisfy a nutritional need rather because they are unaware they are full and not thinking about the consequences of stress eating. Before we act, we are urged to be curious, to wonder, to consider the consequences of our feelings, thoughts and actions. Socrates said, “the unexamined life is not worth living.” Aristotle wrote that “knowing yourself is the beginning of all wisdom.” Ralph Waldo Emerson, said, “What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us.” Augustine, said, “Know yourself, that you may know God.” John Calvin wrote. “Without knowledge of self, there is no knowledge of God.” Benjamin Franklin said, “There are three things extremely hard: steel, a diamond, and to know one’s self.”

Like the pull of a Dorito our heart can deceive us into thinking that we need more of something — material possessions, success, approval or pleasure — to be happy. This deception leads us to pursue these desires relentlessly, often at the expense of our spiritual, emotional and physical health, diminishing our ability to love extravagantly and do good.

Have you noticed how easy it is to lose motivation? You can sit for 30 minutes with a bowl of Doritos on the coffee table and not eat a single one. Then you eat one. Then another, and another. The same is true for our thoughts that can quickly spiral negatively. The good news is God knows our thoughts, heart and feelings and how to harness them for love and goodness. God puts these insights into the Bible, books, therapists, loving family and good friends. Self-awareness expands goodness. Amen.