

DIAGNOSING OUR TRUE HEART CONDITION

So how do we begin to diagnose our true heart condition? The process is simple though it isn't easy.

Step One: Ask Jesus to show you the true condition of your heart.

The Scriptures assure us God's Spirit is willing to help us discover the deep and hidden things in our lives. God is in the business of uncovering the secrets of the soul. Romans 8:26-27 promises us, *"in the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will."*

Imagine that God searches our hearts and knows absolutely everything that's there. At first that can be an unsettling thought. Who wants God to see everything that's tucked away in the recesses of our hearts? Yet God's purpose in doing a heart examination is not to find fresh evidence to condemn us. No, it's so His Holy Spirit can pray for us in accordance with God's will. Isn't that amazing? What deep love and concern our heavenly Father has for each of us even when our hearts are hard. He directs His Holy Spirit to plead for us before His throne before it's too late. If that's not encouraging truth, what is?

Like every other aspect of growth in the Christian life, a genuine heart exam requires our cooperation with God. As the old adage has it, "God doesn't steer a parked car." We have to be willing to respond to God's searching grace at work in our hearts with a sincere willingness to change and obey.

Before You Try This at Home

Let's be as practical as we can in getting a heart exam started. Consider praying the following prayer to express your humility and a willingness to obey God.

Caution: Before you try this prayer, realize it may be one of the most dangerous, life-altering, fasten-your-seat-belt prayers you will ever pray. Your entire life may be turned upside down and inside out before it's all over. There may even be days you momentarily regret you began this journey to know the truth of what's in your heart. At the same time, when it's all over, you may well be more fully in love with Christ than you have been your entire life. Are you wondering just what kind of prayer can create potential chaos and exuberant joy all at the same time?

Here it is:

"Dear Lord, You have my permission to show me everything that's in my heart. You also have my permission to get rid of everything that doesn't belong there. Amen."

That's all there is to it. Rather simple, isn't it? Yet it isn't a prayer to be uttered lightly. The moment you pray, God could begin right away to show you parts of your true heart condition.

Step Two: Take a spiritual inventory called the Personal Heart Exam.

The Personal Heart Exam is not a clinically tested instrument or a professional assessment tool. It was not developed by licensed counselors in an academic setting. Such tried and tested tools are available if you wish to pursue those. The Personal Heart Exam is a simple spiritual inventory composed of questions designed to help people better understand their heart issues. The first section examines the twelve different ways our hearts can be damaged (with thanks to John Regier's excellent book, *Twelve Locked Hearts*). The second section examines the thirteen sins that Jesus tells us come from a hardened heart, [Jesus] went on: *"What comes out of a man is what makes him 'unclean.' For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man 'unclean'" (Mark 7:20-23).*

The Personal Heart Examination and Scoring Key follow the test. If God is to soften your hearts, you must first know and acknowledge the nature of your heart problems. The Scoring Key is quite simple and can help identify which heart issues are at work in your life. For example, the more often you check bitterness as an issue, the more likely it is that an attitude of unforgiveness is blocking your heart. The goal is to gain an awareness of the areas where you have hardened your heart. Once we know what issues are locking our hearts, we can come to Jesus in prayer and ask Him to disconnect the pain and forgive the sin.

A Personal Heart Examination

Section A

Circle any of the following statements that are true about you or the home you grew up in. If the statement concerns you or one of your parents, circle that number if the statement is true some or most of the time. Otherwise, leave the number uncircled. Answer the questions as you would during the worst period of your life, whether that is now or in the past. Instructions for the self-scoring key are found at the end of the exam.

1. I grew up often feeling I was all on my own.
2. I was raised by parents who were too busy to notice me.
3. I was often upset or frightened by my father or mother's temper.
4. I remember being sexually abused by someone when I was growing up.
5. My father or mother could simply shut down their emotions and feel nothing.
6. I was severely criticized for not measuring up to my father or mother's standards.
7. I grew up in an environment where people rarely forgave each other.
8. My father or mother always had to have the last word in any conversation.
9. When one of my parents got depressed, they would ignore or neglect the rest of us.
10. My mother or father would get upset every time someone told them what to do.
11. I discovered pornography in our house.
12. I was taught that a career or earning money is the true measure of success.
13. I felt I was never good enough no matter how hard I tried.
14. When I was hurting, no one reached out to comfort me.
15. I was sometimes spanked too hard or slapped in anger.
16. My dad or mother could easily get emotionally upset.
17. I always got the feeling I was a disappointment to my parents.
18. When I was young I was left alone for hours to take care of myself.
19. It seemed like having money was the one thing that made my parents happy.
20. My father would watch movies with explicit sexual scenes.
21. I grew up being taught to distrust those in authority.
22. One of my parents would go to a room and not come out if they were sad or upset.
23. One of my parents was overly controlling of others.
24. Old hurts and wounds were often rehearsed at our dinner table.
25. Our family was happy when we had money; we were miserable when we were broke.
26. One of my parents had an affair while I was growing up.
27. One of my parents wanted nothing to do with God.
28. I was afraid of making a mistake because of the rejection I would experience.
29. One parent would just walk away if the other parent started to argue with the
30. I was sometimes slapped or hit with a fist as a form of discipline.
31. I had to emotionally prop up one of my parents when they were sad or depressed.
32. My father or mother would get very upset if they did not get their way.
33. I rarely heard the words, "I forgive you," growing up.
34. One of my parents used profanity and swore often.
35. My parents would make promises to me, and then just forget about them.
36. My father or mother left our home for good when I was young.

37. I sometimes feel I'm going to end up all alone.
38. I could just disappear and no one would care.
39. I often find myself swearing under my breath.
40. The memories of abuse in my home are just too painful to talk about.
41. When someone mistreats me, I can simply disconnect and not feel anything.
42. I have to do everything just right to feel good about myself
43. I think people should earn my forgiveness if they've hurt me.
44. I have to feel in charge at all times to feel comfortable.
45. I can't focus on the needs of others when I'm really sad.
46. I really don't like having a boss I have to report to; I'd rather work for myself
47. I spend a good deal of time each day thinking about sexual fantasies.
48. I'll put in long hours overtime at work if I can gain recognition for it.
49. I'm depressed when other people are able to buy nice things I can't afford.
50. I enjoy reading romance novels or watching movies that are steamy
51. I resent people telling me what to do.
52. I can think only about my own problem(s) until they are resolved.
53. I enjoy telling others what to do; it's the only way to get something done.
54. People who mistreat me should pay the price.
55. Most people are too lazy to do things right; they do just enough to get by.
56. I have no recollection of long periods of my life.
57. Someone used sex to hurt me when I was younger.
58. I often am in trouble for losing my temper.
59. I have to take care of myself; no one else will.
60. I fear people that I love will one day leave me.
61. I find it hard to sympathize with people who are hurting.
62. I try to help people by pointing out their weaknesses or shortcomings.
63. I feel like I'm damaged goods because of the way I was abused.
64. I often regret things I've said in an argument.
65. I frequently forget important things such as anniversaries or birthdays.
66. I worry that someday I will be left for someone else.
67. Making a good living is my number one goal in life.
68. I have a secret sexual fantasy life no one knows anything about.
69. I don't like anyone telling me what to do.
70. I forget about the needs of others when I'm depressed.
71. I've been told I come on too strong with other people.
72. I've been told I have a hard time forgiving others.
73. I've been told I'm too married to my work.
74. I've been told I overreact whenever they ask me to do something.
75. I've been told I tend to dominate others.
76. I've been told I'm too much of a perfectionist.
77. I've been told I don't know how to enjoy life.
78. I've been told I just fall apart when anyone criticizes me.
79. I've been told I need to deal with my frequent sexual thoughts about others.
80. I've been told I just check out of a conversation when it gets intense.
81. I've been told I have trouble asking for forgiveness.
82. I've been told others worry about how often I get depressed.
83. I've been told I have a problem with my temper.
84. I've been told I worry too much about being left all alone in life.

PERSONAL HEART EXAMINATION SCORING KEY (for Section A)

Using the answer sheets from the Personal Heart Examination, Section A, circle each number you circled in the exam. Then count the number of times you circled a number on each line and put the total at the end of that line under Score.

Section A: The Types of a Harden Heart								Score
Abandoned Heart	1	14	35	37	60	66	84	
Rejected Heart	2	13	33	8	59	65	78	
Angry Heart	3	16	34	39	58	64	83	
Defiled Heart	4	15	30	40	57	63	77	
Detached Heart	5	18	29	41	56	61	80	
Judgmental Heart	6	17	28	42	55	62	76	
Bitter Heart	7	24	36	43	54	72	81	
Controlling Heart	8	23	32	44	53	71	75	
Proud Heart	9	22	31	45	52	70	82	
Rebellious Heart	10	21	27	46	51	69	74	
Immoral Heart	11	20	26	47	50	68	79	
Temporal Heart	12	19	25	48	49	67	73	

Taking the Next Steps

Now that you've completed the questions in Section A and totaled the score for each type of hardened heart, you should look for the scores that are the highest in number. A score of 0 means you likely do not struggle with this type of hardened heart. A score of 1 or 2 indicates it may be a slight problem, a score of 3 to 5 suggests this is an issue in your life, and a score of 6 or 7 indicates a serious heart issue in this area. You may find you have one or more types of hardened heart in your life.

Take your list and, starting with the highest score, pray through each hardened heart in the following way:

"Dear Lord Jesus, I confess that I struggle with a (name the type of hardened heart) that is the result of my painful experiences and sinful choices. I ask Your forgiveness for my hardened heart and choose to renounce a (name the type of hardened heart). I ask You to remove it from my life and in its place to give me a softened heart."

I claim the Bible's promise of Ezekiel 36:26, "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh." Thank You, Jesus, that the finished work of the cross has made me a new creation, that the old (name the type of hardened heart) is now gone and the new has come. Keep my new heart soft toward You and others each and every day. In Your Name I pray, amen.

Section B

Please circle the number if the statement is true of your personal thoughts or behavior some or most of the time. If it is not true of your personal thoughts or behavior some or most of the time, leave it uncircled. Again, answer these questions from the perspective of the worst time of your life, whether that is recently or in the past. Instructions for the self-scoring key are found at the end of the exam.

1. I struggle with wicked or evil thoughts toward others.
2. I find myself attracted to movies that include sexual immorality.
3. I take things from others but don't return them.
4. I sometimes wish a person who hurt me were dead.
5. I look at other people with lustful thoughts.
6. I find myself always wanting to have more than what I already own.
7. I can carry a deep grudge toward some people.
8. I will tell a small lie to avoid getting into trouble.
9. I sometimes laugh at dirty jokes.
10. I am often jealous of someone else's looks or accomplishments.
11. I like to think I know better than most people.
12. I will say bad things about other people behind their back.
13. I have made several foolish decisions I later regretted.
14. I disregard the warnings of others if I believe I know better.
15. I like to be the one person that's noticed in a room.
16. I say biting things about other people.
17. I'm sad or upset when other people get recognized and I don't.
18. I enjoy seeing sexually suggestive or illicit scenes in a movie.
19. I sometimes lie when it's just as easy to tell the truth.
20. I hope something bad happens to my enemies.
21. No matter how much money I have, I always seem to want more.
22. I flirt with someone else's spouse now and then.
23. I get so mad at others that I could hurt them.
24. I sometimes cheat a little on income taxes.
25. I was involved in premarital sexual experiences.
26. I sometimes imagine myself doing things that I know are wrong.
27. I struggle with feelings of hatred toward someone.
28. I take things home from the office and don't bring them back.
29. I enjoy making eye contact with an attractive person even if they're married.
30. I really struggle with resentment.
31. I find obscene jokes or stories amusing.
32. Occasionally I will spread damaging information about other people.
33. I don't like consulting with others before I make a big decision.
34. I dwell on sexual experiences I had before I was married.
35. I have to admit there are some people I almost hate.
36. I find myself attracted to owning expensive or nice things.
37. I put on appearances to get people to think what I want them to think.
38. I am upset when someone close to me gets something I really wanted.
39. I associate with people who make me look good.
40. I sometimes have evil thoughts about other people.
41. I will watch a sexually explicit program when no one is looking.
42. I take things from others and don't tell them.
43. I can get so upset with someone that I wish they were dead and gone.
44. I find myself thinking about other potential lovers during sexual intimacy.
45. I am willing to put others in second place if I can get ahead in my finances.
46. I have some feelings of ill will towards others.
47. I sometimes tell white lies.

48. In my mind I bring sensual images from the internet into my bedroom.
49. I am jealous of others in certain areas.
50. I will reveal confidential or embarrassing things about another person in a conversation.
51. I can handle life on my own.
52. I like taking risky chances with my money even if others warn me.
53. I have deep grievances I've never shared with anyone.
54. Buying something I want makes me happy, but soon I want something else.
55. I think a lot about my former boyfriend or girlfriend even though I'm married.
56. I can't help hating certain people.
57. I take things home from work and don't return them.
58. I like to give a second glance to a sexy person, who passes by,
59. I know some of my thoughts are wicked, but I like them anyway.
60. I am a thrill-seeker who likes taking foolish chances.
61. I believe that I'm usually right and other people are usually wrong.
62. I will sometimes say things that could destroy someone else's reputation.
63. I am jealous of other people.
64. I will tell a dirty joke now and then.
65. I often exaggerate to make things sound better than they are.
66. I spend a great deal of time daydreaming about sexual fantasies.
67. I take things without asking.
68. I dwell on how much people I dislike should suffer for their sins.
69. I can hate another person who mistreats me.
70. I find myself looking at people, even if they are married, and wishing we were in a romantic relationship.
71. I can use spiteful words about others.
72. I make quick and impulsive decisions.
73. I like to read all the details about celebrities or politicians who get caught in a sexual scandal.
74. I will punish others with the silent treatment.
75. I push myself to earn more this year than I did last year.
76. I leave people with a false impression of what I'm thinking.
77. I wish I could live the life of someone else rather than my own.
78. I'm wiser than most people I know.

PERSONAL HEART EXAMINATION SCORING KEY (for Section B)

Using the answer sheets from the Personal Heart Examination, Section B, circle each number you circled in the exam. Then count the number of times you circled a number on each line and put the total at the end of that line under Score.

Section B: The Types of Spiritual Issues of a Hardened Heart							Score
Evil Thoughts	1	26	27	40	59	68	
Sexual Immorality	2	25	34	41	58	66	
Theft	3	24	28	42	57	67	
Murder	4	23	30	43	56	69	
Adultery	5	22	29	44	55	70	
Greed	6	21	36	45	54	75	
Malice	7	20	35	46	53	74	
Deceit	8	19	37	47	65	76	
Lewdness	9	18	31	48	64	73	
Envy	10	7	38	49	64	73	
Arrogance	11	15	39	51	61	78	
Slander	12	16	32	50	62	71	
Folly (Foolishness)	13	14	33	52	60	72	

Taking the Next Steps

Now that you've completed the questions in Section B and totaled the score for each type of spiritual issue from a hardened heart, look for the scores that are the highest in number. A score of 0 means you likely do not struggle with this type of spiritual issue. A score of 1 or 2 indicates it may be a slight problem, a score of 3 to 5 suggests it is a spiritual issue to address in your life, and a score of 6 or 7 indicates a serious spiritual issue. You may find that you have one or more spiritual issues in your life.

Take your list of spiritual issues and, starting with the highest score, pray through each locked heart in the following way:

“Dear Lord Jesus, I confess that I struggle with (name the type of spiritual issue) that is the result of my painful experiences and sinful choices. I ask Your forgiveness for allowing this spiritual issue to harden my heart. I ask You to forgive this sin and remove it from my life and in its place to give me a softened heart. I claim the Bible's promise of 1 John 1:7-9, “But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. ...If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” Thank You, Jesus, that through the finished work of the cross, I can find complete forgiveness and freedom from (name the type of spiritual issue) Keep my heart softened toward You and others each and every day. In Your Name I pray, amen.”

Step Three: Take a simple self-test called The Emotional Pain Words Worksheet.

The third step in diagnosing our true heart condition is to look at the pain we feel in our hearts day after day. Though we know it's there, we may have never stopped and analyzed what types of pain we are experiencing. There is great value in actually putting words to what we are feeling.

The Emotional Pain Words worksheet was developed by John Regier. This worksheet will help you discover the emotional pain at work in your life. This worksheet is also not a scientifically tested tool. Rather it's intended to help clarify what damaging emotions are at work in you.

The worksheet lists two hundred different emotional pain words we can experience in life. (Isn't it sad that in this fallen world we can experience heart sorrow and anguish in hundreds of ways?) The worksheet will help you identify the major emotional pain issues that have likely caused you to shut down your heart. Circle the words that best describe the pain you feel, and beside each word you circle, write a number from one to ten. One indicates a low-level intensity of pain while ten indicates the highest level. Then review the words you circled paying the most attention to the words with the higher numbers next to them. Those likely are the pains that are locking your heart.

To find healing and victory over these painful emotions, you must first be aware of what they are.

Emotional Pain Words

Abandoned	Detested	Insignificant	Silenced
Accused	Devalued	Invalidated	Stepped on
Afraid	Didn't belong	Isolated	Shattered
All my fault	Didn't measure up	Knocked down	Stressed
Alone	Dirty	Judged	Stupid
Always wrong	Disappointed	Left out	Suicidal
Angry	Discarded	Lied to	Taken advantage of
Annihilated	Discounted	Lonely	Terrified
Anxious	Discouraged	Lost	Threatened
Apathetic	Disgraced	Made fun of	Torn apart
Ashamed	Dishonored	Manipulated	Trapped
Avoided	Disregarded	Mistreated	Trashed
Babied	Dominated	Mocked	Ugly
Bad	Embarrassed	Molested	Unable to speak
Belittled	Empty	Neglected	Unaccepted
Betrayed	Excluded	No good	Uncaring
Bewildered	Exhausted	No support	Uncared for
Bitter	Exploited	No way out	Unchosen
Blamed	Exposed	Not being affirmed	Unclean
Can't do anything right	Failure	Not cared for	Undesirable
Can't trust anyone	Fear, Fearful	Not cherished	Unfairly judged
Cheap	Foolish	Not deserving to live	Unfairly treated
Cheated	Forced	Not listened to	Unfit
Coerced	Forsaken	Not measured up	Unimportant
Condemned	Friendless	Not valued	Unheard
Confused	Frightened	Opinions not valued	Unloved
Conspired against	Frustrated	Overwhelmed	Unlovable
Controlled	Good for nothing	Paralyzed	Unnecessary
Cornered	Guilty	Powerless	Unneeded
Crushed	Hated	Pressured	Unnoticed
Cursed	Hate myself	Pressure to	Unprotected
Cut off	Helpless	Publicly shamed	Unresponsive
Deceived	Hopeless	Put Down	Unsafe
Defeated	Humiliated	Rejected	Unwanted
Defenseless	Hurt	Repulsed	Useless
Defrauded	Hysterical	Resentful	Valueless
Degraded	Ignored	Revenge	Violated
Depressed	Impure	Ridiculed	Vulnerable
Deprived	Inadequate	Ruined	Walked on
Deserted	Incompetent	Sad	Wasted
Desires rejected	Indecent	Scared	Weak
Despair	Inferior	Secluded	Worthless
Despised	Inhibited	Self-disgust	Wounded
Despondent	Insecure	Separated	
Destroyed	Insensitive to my needs	Shamed	

Step Four: Make a list of how other people, your family, and your spouse have hurt you.

Once we have identified the pain that lingers in our hearts, there is value in going back to discover who and what caused it. Only then can we begin to find freedom and release. This brings us to the fourth step in diagnosing our true heart condition: writing down the names of the significant people who affected our life in a negative and painful way.

The purpose of this exercise is not to encourage a victim mentality. Heaven forbid, for the Bible encourages us to have a victorious mentality, *"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose ... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us"* (Romans 8:28,37). God's Word teaches we are to deal with past pain from the perspective of a victor not a victim.

At the same time, the Bible calls us to take responsibility for our lives, to forgive others, and to admit the choices we've made in response to the hurts and pain others have caused us. To do this we need to list one by one how other people have hurt us significantly, including our family and our spouse. Only then can we begin the needed work of forgiving each person. This involves us releasing them from the moral debt they owe us. It's not necessary to recall each person on earth who has ever slighted or offended you. Rather, focus on those people whose actions left an enduring painful mark on your life.

Has the Pain Been Buried Alive?

Facing the past may be a difficult, even traumatic, experience. It may dredge up old memories and experiences you prefer to leave buried. Yet, unhealed wounds when buried are buried alive. The purpose of this exercise is to understand what painful memories and experiences may still be controlling you and blocking intimacy in relationships. It can make all the difference in the process of softening your heart.

Ask God to continually examine your hearts. Even in the midst of a conflict with another person we can silently pray,

"Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." (Psalm 139:23-24)

Step Five: Learn from the pain and then let it go at the foot of the cross.

This principle is closely related to the previous one, but it gives us more specific instructions about what to do with our regrets. While our regrets can become great life coaches and masterful teachers, once we have fully learned our painful lessons it's time to graduate from UDR (the University of Deep Regrets). It's time to go on with our lives.

When a painful episode from our life comes to mind, how should we respond to it? It might be helpful to imagine a large Dumpster directly beneath the cross of Jesus Christ. Imagine taking the sin in your hard heart that led to a traumatic episode in your marriage and stuffing it in a large trash bag. Once it's all inside the bag, cinch up the tie strings, carry it over to the Dumpster, toss the bag inside, close the lid, and walk away.

Each time you experience another painful memory of what you said and did, go back to the cross and toss that memory into the same Dumpster. When you open the lid and look inside, you'll find it's empty. All the trash you left there before is gone. That's because there's nothing left in God's economy of the hard-hearted sin that produced your regrettable behavior.

Paid to Perfection

How is it possible to know that when God empties the Dumpster, it's empty for good? Listen to the final words of Christ on the cross: *"It is finished"* (John 19:30).

Nothing more can be added or done to Christ's payment for our sins. The sins that we so regret in our family or other relationships have been paid in full. Once they are dropped into the Dumpster of Christ's forgiveness, they are gone for good. Search as you will, you will never find them again. Our debts have been erased and cleared for all time.

Colossians 2:13-14 describes this incredible process: *"When you were dead in your sins...God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross."*

Would You Chase a Garbage Truck?

It's important to leave our regrets behind and by faith go on with our lives. Can you imagine chasing a lumbering garbage truck down the street yelling, "Please come back! Don't take my trash away from me! I desperately need it for just a few more days!" We do just that when we refuse to let go of our painful regrets. Let God take them away for good.

The apostle Paul, personally responsible for violently persecuting Christians in his preconversion days, wrote later in his life, *"But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus"* (Philippians 3:13-14).

*And now complete in Him, My robe, His righteousness, Close sheltered 'neath His side, I am divinely blest.
Lord, now indeed I find Thy pow'r and Thine alone,
Can change the leper's spots
And melt the heart of stone.*

*And when before the throne I stand in Him complete,
I'll lay my trophies down, All down at Jesus' feet.
It is finished*

Lord Jesus, I bring to You all the regrets I carry in life. I have said and done that I wish I could erase. I bring these painful regrets to the cross where You have promised to separate my sins as far as the east is from the west. Let me learn the valuable life lessons my regrets can teach me. Let me not repeat these same mistakes again. Take the worst moments of my past and transform them by Your grace into a blessing to others. Let me leave the past behind and live with hope for all the good things You are still going to do in me. Amen.