

# Toward a Biblical Model of Learning

Notes from Ruth Beechick's **A Biblical Psychology of Learning**

Modern learning theories have been largely derived from psychological studies. The Behaviorists studied lab animals (personless bodies) and emphasized the impacts of reward and punishment on learning. The Humanists studied human people, but still treated them as merely highly evolved biological organisms. Developmental theories emphasize the different stages of the process of cognitive and moral development. Needs theories like Maslow's try to add a higher dimension of self-actualization (personified by people like Jesus and Ghandi), but none of these theories considers the Biblical concept of man as spiritual beings created in the image of God. Nor do they take into account the Biblical teaching about the fall of man, and its impacts on the heart of man, his personality and behavior. To the extent that we are spiritual souls residing in physical bodies, there can be some value in modern theories – after all God uses punishments and rewards, and the Bible recognizes a process in growing in wisdom and maturity. But a Biblical theory has to take into account the spiritual nature of man as revealed in the Bible, as well as his material being.

## The concept of the “heart” of man vs. the “mind” of man.

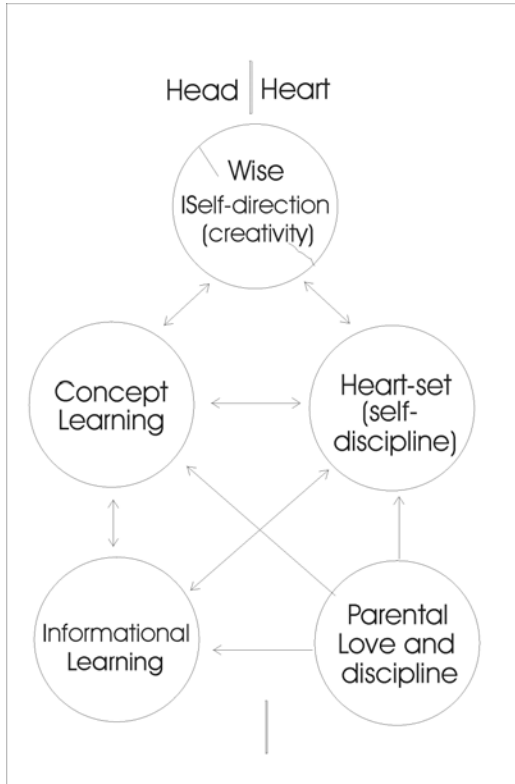
The Bible uses the word “heart” over 800 times and attributes a central place to the heart in spirit-soul activities and affections. It distinguishes it from the operations of the head and the brain. Ancient cultures had a similar concept. The brain and the heart appear to stimulate and react to each other. The Hebrew concept of the heart included thought, emotions and will. (Religion, Reason and Revelation by Gordon Clark) The Bible gives great prominence to the heart, and a Biblical theory of learning must be concerned with not just the mind, but also all the areas of life attributed to the heart of man.

Here is a classification of the applications of the word “heart” to man:

- **Physical life** – there are less references to the heart in its material than in its immaterial sense – but it was seen as central to life and strength: Gen 18:5, Judg 19:5, Psa 38:10, Prov 14:30.
- **Spiritual life** The heart is the soil in which the word is sown (Matt 13:9) and the place of belief or unbelief (Rom 10:10, Hebr 13:12) resulting in whether God or Satan controls our hearts (2 Cor 8:16, Acts 5:3). Christ and his Spirit dwell in our hearts (Eph 3:17, 2 Cor 1:22, Col 3:15, Rom 5:5, 2 Cor 4:6)
- **Moral life** The law is written in the heart (Rom 2:15) and from it comes obedience or disobedience (Matt 12:34,35; Mark 7:21,22) The heart can be good or evil (Prov 22:11, Psa 32:11, 1 Kgs 8:61, Jere 16:12) The heart is the seat of the conscience (Hebr 10:22) and either loves God or is lifted in pride against Him (Ezek 28:2,5; Matt 22:37) It can be hardened, darkened or enlightened (Rom 1:21; Isa 63:17, 2 Cor 3:15,16)
- **Emotional life** The heart loves or hates, it rejoices or sorrows (1 Tim 1:5, Lev 19:17, Isa 65:14, Acts 2:46, Prov 25:20, John 16:6, Psa 109:22, Acts 7:54, Deut 19:6, Eccl 2:20, Jere 32:40, Deut 28:28, Psa 143:4, Jos 5:1). Emotions are in God's heart too. (Hos 11:8)
- **Motivations** Whether motivated to good or evil, it comes from the heart, and not just the mind. (Eccl 1:13, Exo 35:9, Dan 1:8, Esth 7:5, Eccl 8:11)
- **Thought life** The heart is said to perceive, know, understand and speak. (Deut 29:4, Isa 32:4, Prov 14:33; 15:7, 14, 28; 16:21,23; 2 Kgs 5:26; Josh 23:14) It also ponders and meditates (Deut 8:5, Luke 2:19, Psa 19:14, Deut 11:18, Prov 6:21, Luke 1:66) even to the point of dialogue (Gen 17:17, 8:21, Psa 27:8, Gen 6:5, Dan 2:30)

## Dr. Ruth Beechick's Model of Learning:

*Parental Love and Discipline is the beginning point. In both Psalms and Proverbs the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and of knowledge. So how does a child reach the point of fearing the Lord? By the father's discipline, which teaches him to fear his father. A child too young to be told about the Lord can learn fear through loving discipline. (Prov 3:12, 10:13) The Father disciplines and when the child is older he comes to see God as he earlier saw his father.*



*Fear is an unpopular word to use in our day, and if some prefer to use the word respect, it still comes out the same. Children who are disciplined learn respect for their parents and teachers. And that respect can be transferred to God.*

*When parents discipline they are really teaching, according to the Greek word paiduo. No English word is quite like this. Sometimes it is translated as learn, teach or instruct, and other times translated as chasten. When parents have done their chastening-teaching job well, teachers find that children are already motivated to learn.*

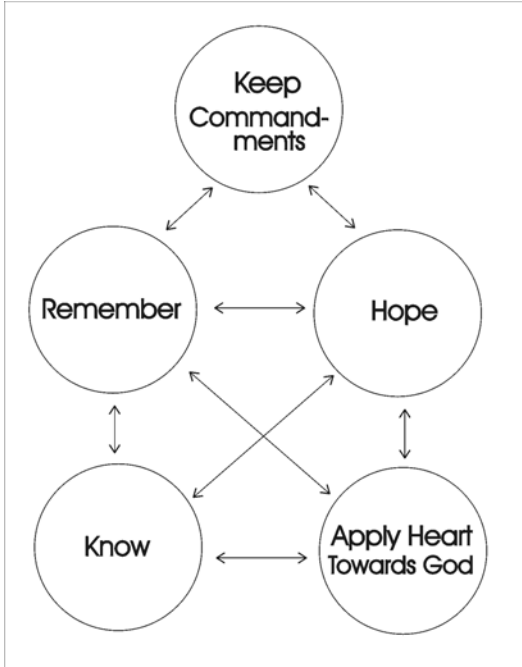
*The arrows indicate that with discipline a child can learn at these levels, and that the child can develop a self-discipline as well. The growth of self-discipline is gradual, and on and off thing. All through his growing years, the adults in his life should keep a proper balance in this – allowing freedom when the child handles it well, but imposing structure and discipline when it is needed.*

*With self-discipline a child learns at all levels. The learning itself becomes a motivation and helps build more self-discipline, and it works both ways. The more self-disciplined, the more he comes to live by the reality principle – he can work for delayed rewards, because he knows he should, because it is right. This brings us into the spiritual aspect of the matter, to conscience and heart-set. It is not a matter of conditioning.*

*Information learning is just that – knowing the stuff. Rote learning belongs here, learning by repetition or memorizing. On this level programmed learning can be used. Concept learning is having insights and understanding beyond the facts, seeing the relationships among them. It is discovery learning – as we figure out the patterns – an ongoing process. It includes comprehension, analysis, synthesis, evaluation and application the various way we process information.*

In the hierarchy of content complexity we proceed from facts to concepts to generalizations to principles. From memorizing the facts, to understanding and proving principles, to applying them to life. But with these must also come a heart set on wise living.

*Wise self direction is there heart-set and learning merge. With sufficient self-discipline and a sufficient base of knowledge, he can take charge of his own learning. It is here that creative knowledge comes about – the knowledge that solves problems and applies concepts to life.*



*In Psalm 78 we read about teaching and heart set. Intention of the heart leads to knowledge.*

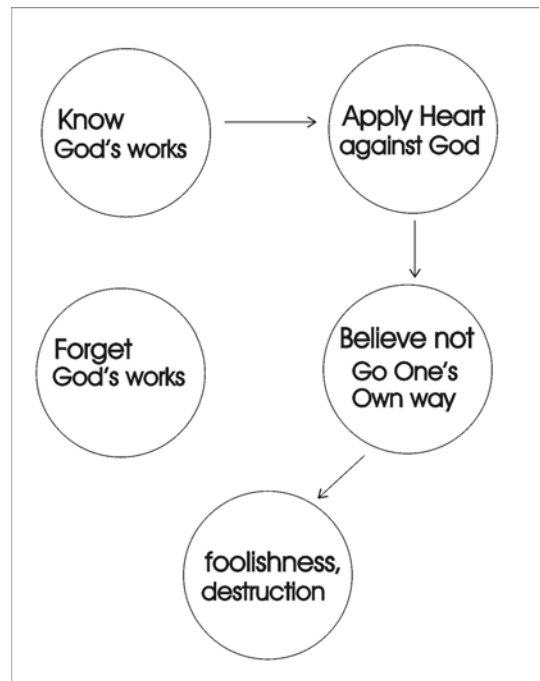
*God had disciplined the people with anger and with love. Those who had internalized the discipline could give ear and incline their ears as admonished in verse 1. The Learning sequence of Psalm 78 begins here with the heart. This leads to knowing (vs 6) and remembering the commandments. Knowing and heart attitudes (including hope) combine to produce obedience (the keeping of the commandments (vs 7). There are two objectives: that they might “set their hope in God” and “keep his commandments”.*

*However some had the knowledge, but lacked a responsive heart attitude. They had knowledge, and had seen miracles. Yet they “kept not the covenant of God and refused to walk in His law.” Because their hearts*

*were not right with God. They did learn life applications, but all the wrong things. They lusted and lied and sinned in many ways and God gave them over to foolishness and destruction.*

*The same information was given to all – for some that led to wisdom and life and for others it led to foolishness and death. The stubborn ones had not “set their hearts aright” (vs 8) and “their heart was not right with Him” (vs 37). This negative heart-set led to speaking against God, forgetting His works, not believing or trusting Him, lusting, flattering, and lying. Because of these, God ultimately destroyed them.*

So the end of learning is not head-knowledge, but heart knowledge as well. This knowledge affects the emotions and will as well as the mind. Thus the goal of teaching is a shaping of the will to be morally obedient to God, based on that knowledge. The student is expected to act on the basis of this knowledge – and his or her behavior will be shaped by it.



Gordon Clark, Thales to Dewey, A Christian Philosophy of Education  
<http://www.pcanet.org/history/findingaids/clark/>  
<http://www.cfcn.org/1999wia/aug1999.htm>