

GUARDING THE HEART

"Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life." Proverbs 4:23.

The physical heart is a large bunch of muscles and it acts as a fountain of life to the entire body. How wonderful it is in its structure -- its auricles and ventricles, its valves and blood-vessels! "For the life of the flesh is in the blood" (Leviticus 17:11), and every moment that blood is being driven by the unrelenting stroke of the heart's pump into the great arteries and all through the body. The heart is the central organ of the human frame; and the health of the body depends upon its soundness and its proper action. It is the point from which all life and action spring. As long as it beats, you will live; the moment it stops, you will die. Only when the action of your heart is healthy and true will your body be gull of energy and strength.

All readers and students of the Bible know that it contains many references to the heart, and that much importance is attached to this portion of the human being. It is the portion of the being which God especially asks for Himself, as in His appeal, "My son, give me thine heart" (Proverbs 23:26).

What does the Bible mean by the term "heart"? It means far more than the physical organ, the literal heart, which forms such an important part of the body, beating day and night from life's beginning to life's end, and sending the blood to every part of the system. In the Old Testament the heart is the home of the affections, and the seat of the will. It is the inmost, deepest, and most hidden part of the entire life -- intellectual, moral, and spiritual. In that deepest region of life, the thoughts, feelings, desires, purposes, and hopes are all conceived before they rise up into the clear light of consciousness. Even though it is not easy to say precisely what is the full significance of the term "heart", as used in our text, we all know what it means. How well you know when your heart is filled with disappointment or sorrow, or when your heart overflows with joy!

It is the heart upon which God looketh, and according to which He evaluates a person. It is not what you are outwardly so much as what you are inwardly that determines your character in the sight of God. Sometimes there is all the difference in the world between yourself as others see you and yourself as God sees you. "For the Lord seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart" (I Samuel 16:7). The world customarily judges your character by your looks and your words and your deeds; but God goes deeper than the world. He looks down into the hidden depths of your heart, and sees there the thoughts and motives that lie beneath your words and behind your deeds.

It is the heart that God regards principally when you draw nigh to worship Him. He said, "This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me" (Matthew 15:8). It is the heart that is represented as the fruitful source of sin: "For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness: All these evil things come from within, and defile the man" (Mark 7:21-23).

The heart is the center of the thoughts, the desires, and the will. A life may be compared to a stream, and that stream flows perpetually. Every stream has a source, just as every tree has a root, and every life has a spring. The late James Vaughan of Brighton, England, said, "Every good thing, and every bad thing, in a man is, first, an imagination, then a desire, then an intention, then an act, and then a habit. And all this chain lies coiled around the heart." Truly, the heart is the source of all these things. Oh, how important, then, is the condition of the heart!

The character of the stream depends on the condition of the heart. If the waters that are flowing are impure, it is because the source is unclean. The heart may be pure, or it may be impure. Christ said, "Blessed are the pure in heart." Every man's outward life is the outcome of his inner condition. He is just living out what is within him. As a tree is known by its fruit, so the condition of a man's heart is known by his outward conduct and life.

To purify the stream, it is certain that one must begin at the source. However, no man can purify the stream by direct efforts of his own upon the stream itself. A great many church members are trying to do that. Take the thoughts, for instance, ---your unbelieving thoughts, your impure thoughts, and your unkind thoughts. You may try to correct your thoughts, or to cleanse your thoughts, but you will not succeed. You cannot put yourself right in thought. In spite of all your resolutions, desires, and efforts, you will not be able to purify your own thoughts. Christ is the One Who can do that for you which you can never do for yourself. Replace self-effort with the strength of Christ.

"Keep your heart with all vigilance and above all that you guard, for out of it flow the springs of life" (Amplified Bible). "Keep thy heart above all keeping." "Keep thy heart above all that thou guardest; for out of it are the issues of life." You guard your pocketbook, your home, and your character; but, above everything else, you should guard your heart. Above all that you guard, guard your heart. Above everything else, the heart must be right, and kept that way. One may guard his lips and watch his steps, but that will be useless unless he guards his heart. Because the heart is prone to wander, God admonishes each of us to guard his heart above everything else. Each is responsible for guarding that from which springs all thoughts, desires, motives, aspirations, words, actions, and hopes. The heart must be guarded above everything else because of the various streams which flow from it. It is right for one to guard his possessions, his credit, his health, his reputation, and his character, but beyond all of these he must give thought, time, and effort to guarding his heart. Beyond everything else one must guard and protect his heart. Since our thoughts are formed in the heart, our purposes are planned there, our words originate there, and our actions proceed from the heart, we exemplify wisdom when we guard well our hearts.

Guarding the heart is a matter of eliminating the things that weaken and cripple -- such as fear and resentment, cultivating better attitudes, and minimizing inner tensions. Next to the piling up of resentments, perhaps the most common danger that we face today is the multiplying of tensions within the life. These tensions develop out of the ways of modern life. There is so much to do and such little time in which to do it. There are tremendous needs and limited resources, vast problems and few solutions, high costs and limited means -- all of these conditions make undue tension a part of life. Acknowledge these situations we must, but to brood over them we dare not.

A minister in another denomination than ours got into the habit of disappearing daily in the late afternoon. His wife became worried about his unusual behavior, but was unable to fathom it. She consulted one of his fellow-ministers, who in turn took the matter to his district superintendent, and finally the matter was laid before the bishop. Upon investigation it was discovered that he was going off alone into a woods overlooking a beautiful valley through which passed the railroad. Here he would sit until after the train had passed, and then he would return to his work. The bishop called him in for an interview. After routine questions, the bishop asked him if there were any connection between his behavior and the passing of the train. He replied, "That's just it! I simply had to go where I could see something that runs which I don't have to push."

That part of one's personality which is the seat of the affections and the source of actions is prone to go astray, following some will-of-the-wisp or other, running off

at a tangent from that on which it should be centered, and that accounts for the fact that it ought to be watched and guarded. It is so important that one keep the truth shining upon the understanding, keep the will subject to God's authority, keep the affections centered on God, and keep the memory stored with good things.

People are made by the things which are in their hearts. What is it that determines character? It is that which lies within. It is the thoughts and motives and desires that we cherish in our hearts. Within us lie the forces that determine so much. A lonely boy in a log cabin in Kentucky lay by the fireside at night reading the books that he borrowed that day. These things entered deep into his heart. He saw visions of great tasks and great service to many people. After he had become a man, he became president of the greatest nation in the world, but he was made by the things which were in his heart. An humble mechanic had it in his heart to make an automobile which even the poor people could own. That man's dreams came true, and Henry Ford became one of the world's greatest industrialists, but he was made by the things which were in his heart. All of us are made by the things which are in our hearts. What is in your heart? Different things should be there. Among the important things are the following:

I. A Peace.

Dr. W. J. Dawson related an interesting story in connection with a couple of visits he made one afternoon in his parish in London. One call was made in the home of a distinguished and noted artist, and this woman of distinction said to him, "Dr. Dawson, I have riches and fame and honor. All of these are mine, but there is one thing I do not have, one thing I long for, it is peace and joy in my soul." This woman of distinction and culture, with all that the world could give her, was without the supreme gift, which only Christ could give, and that was peace. The other call of the distinguished minister was in a home of poverty. The woman had worked to support the children that her husband had left her when he died, and she said, "Dr. Dawson, I haven't had very much of the world's goods. I have had to work very hard. It has been struggle and trial all along the way, but I have one thing that I would not give for all the world; that is peace and joy in my soul." Of course, Christ alone can give peace and joy. Wealth is not on the outside, but it is inside. It is in what one is, and not in what he has.

II. A Song.

The person who does not have a song in his heart is to be pitied. Of course, there are many kinds of songs today. We hear them daily as they thunder over television and radio. The song of disappointment is sung by some, and the song of unrequited love is sung by others, and the song of hope is sung by still others.

There are always the two roads -- the low and the high. In speaking of God, David said, "He brought me up also out of the horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock, and established my goings. And he hath put a new song in my mouth, even praise unto our God" (Psalm 40:2-3). Those who are on the upper road have a song of trust and satisfaction in their hearts. With joy they sing, "O happy day, that fixed my choice," and "I am satisfied with Jesus."

III. A Dream.

The Empire State Building towers above the other skyscrapers in New York City, but it was not always a building one hundred and two stories high. It was once a dream in some man's heart. It takes dreamers to build. Everybody needs a dream or an ideal in his heart to lift him above the low levels of everyday existence, and give him something for which to strive. God has a place for you. Put yourself in His hand, go straight ahead and do His will, and He will open up the way for you, and help you in doing what He wants you to do. Lincoln said, "I will prepare myself and

some day my chance will come." God wants prepared people and one should be ready when the opportunity for service comes his way. God can use any life that is surrendered to Him, but He can do far more with a life which is prepared for His service. When God wanted a man for the biggest task in the Old Testament era, He selected Moses, the best-trained man of his day. When He wanted a man for the biggest task in the New Testament era, He selected Paul, the best-trained man of his day.

IV. A Name.

The name that should be engraved on your heart is the Name which is above every name. It is the "sweetest note in seraph song, sweetest name on mortal tongue" --- it is the name of Jesus.

1. Take the name of Jesus as a buffer against temptation.

From His early years until His death Christ had to face temptations, but He overcame them all, and He can give you the strength to overcome your temptations.

"Take the name of Jesus with you,
As a shield from ev'ry snare;
If temptations round you gather,
Breathe that holy name in prayer."

2. Take the name of Jesus as a haven in life's storms.

You may not be encountering any storms right now. Life may be running along smoothly for you, but there will come a day when the storms of life will beat upon you. "Into each life some rain must fall, some days be dark and dreary." In such hours Christ can help you. He knows what troubles are, for He was "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief."

"Take the name of Jesus with you,
Child of sorrow and of woe;
It will joy and comfort give you,
Take it, then, where'er you go."

3. Take the name of Jesus as a goal in life's endeavors.

In the final analysis, the end of all your labors should be to please Him Who died for you. In so doing the bad things will be put away and you will do your best as you live for Him.

In the room where he did his work, Kipling had engraved over the fireplace these words, "The night cometh when no man can work." Day by day the great poet was constantly reminded that he must keep busy at his God-given task. Let us keep busy for our Lord. At best, life is very short. There is so much to do for Christ, and we have such a little time in which to do it. Yield or surrender your heart to Christ and spend the remainder of your life in doing the things that please Him.