

Redirecting the Heart in Prayer

By Peter McArthur



Perhaps our greatest struggle is in keeping the heart regularly focussed on the Lord. It would seem that almost every other spiritual endeavour is easier than this one. Fasting we can get used to; regular prayer we can discipline ourselves in; Bible reading we can work at. But keeping and guarding the issues of the heart — this is an awesome task. Yet God commands it as vital if we are to grow in spiritual health.

Keep your heart with all diligence; for out of it spring the issues of life. *Prov 4:23*

The actual Hebrew reads this way: “Observe and guard, preserve, protect and watch over your heart with all your watching...” or “...keep your heart with all your keeping...”

Note there’s an insistence to “doubly” watch over and keep the heart. Since the Lord is a God of economy He doesn’t waste words. So when He says that we’re to “doubly” watch out for the state of the heart, He certainly means it! In the original language there is the emphatic meaning of setting a double guard over the ground of the heart, just as a king might set a double watch of guards over his city gates.

John Flavel was a Christian of the Puritan era much concerned with practical Christianity. He wanted to see believers Walk the Talk, as we say today. He once wrote: “The greatest difficulty before salvation is to win a person’s heart to God; but the greatest difficulty after salvation is to keep a person’s heart with God ”.

Nothing has changed in this matter. The first flush of faith and love in the Lord can give way to a familiarity that is based on a lack of fear of the Lord, and apathy in progressing spiritually that comes from being distracted by other issues. What is it that’s so important about guarding the heart, and how on earth do we do it?

First of all, no one, absolutely no one, can possibly keep guard over their heart unless there has first been the wonder of the New Birth. This “re-generation” of one’s heart must always be the starting point of learning how to constantly keep focussed on the Lord.

Sadly there are many who profess a faith in Christ who have not been truly regenerate. Pastors see this often. Men and women who have come to the altar so to speak, who have made a declaration of faith in the Saviour but whose hearts have not been deeply moved. Moved in their soul, maybe; but not in their heart.

This has caused me my own fair share of soul-searching when I have been party to somebody “coming to the Lord.” I have searched my heart and soul to know how I missed discerning that such a person had not been truly converted deep within. Too many of us as leaders in the Church have had to bear this burden.

However, when a person is “soundly converted” and the heart truly regenerate by the Holy Spirit, the work of guarding the heart from slackness, disorder and dullness can begin. This then is where we begin, all of us. Trying to maintain a guard over the heart without being born again from above will only end up becoming a religious work. And religion will always keep you in chains, usually to itself.†

However, if you’re truly assured you are regenerate and converted deep within, then the task ahead is easily stated. It is simply this:

To take such care of the soul,
that together with the Holy Spirit,
we work towards preserving our heart
for the purpose for which God first saved us.

Put like that, do you see the grand scope of this thing? The practice of guarding the heart is not a religious work that tires us out and wears us down. Rather it’s a joyous co-operation with the Holy Spirit in maintaining the fresh condition of the heart that occurred when we were first saved!

As we work hand in hand with the Spirit we’ll be continually adjusting the state of our heart so that it always conforms to God’s intended purpose for us — maturity.

I find this an exhilarating thought! This is not just another discipline and religious thing we have to do to become “holy”. Rather it’s an exciting journey walking with the Spirit as He convicts us when we’re to adjust something in our lives that’s out of order. He will alert us to anything that displeases the Father, and if we’re sensitive to His leading, we will instantly correct that area of our life.

What child of God wouldn’t want to participate in this? This ongoing practice will propel us into greater and greater realms of spiritual sensitivity. Ofcourse, it’s not without effort. Don’t think you can arrive at such a spiritual state through half-heartedness and laxity.

Your flesh will certainly resist the effort required, and it will tell you there are other things to do rather than pray. It will baulk at the idea of disciplining yourself. It will tempt you with other more “pressing engagements”. It will even make you feel hungry and lure you to the refrigerator!

It will, as Paul said, war against your spiritual inclinations:

For the flesh lusts against the spirit, and the spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish. Gal 5: 17

Nevertheless, the Holy Spirit stands beside you to comfort, aid and work in bringing you to maturity of spirit and soul. So, now to the practical application of this. A foundation is always given by the Lord for anything He does, and this is also true in this case. The foundation for learning how to re-direct the heart and keep focussed on the Lord is found in the words of Jesus.

But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly. Mtt 6:6

Here we find the clue for beginning this work of guarding the heart. And ofcourse it has to do with our unseen spiritual life. What we do in private before the Lord is far more important than what we present as an outward show to man.

In this passage Jesus is telling us an all-important spiritual truth. He says that if we lay a foundation in our life, of regularly going to the Father in the privacy of our prayer life, if we seek Him far from the eyes of men, then He will reward us openly in the public arena when the time comes.

In other words, what we do in private before God will always pay dividends in the daily press and busy-ness of life. We cannot possibly keep guard over our heart in the day-to-day issues of life, if we haven't already prepared ourselves with the Lord beforehand.

When the rush of the day and the clamour of the world begin to squeeze in, it's far too late to attempt then and there to guard the heart. We only tend to rush it, to fall back into some tried and tested past "method" to protect our inner peace. Usually this is all done in an atmosphere of being caught unprepared. I know, I've been there.

But by daily preparing ourselves in the secret place, and waiting upon Him to come into our life in a fresh way, a foundation will be laid, upon which we can build during that day. So if a situation should arise that might attempt to "steal away our heart", the inner preparation gained in the secret place will carry us through.†

The situation we might face need not necessarily be temptation to sin. It could be the issue of an unpleasant encounter with someone, or finding yourself in an argument. There could be anger, accusation, jealousy, gossip, etc. All of these things can steal away the stillness of our heart. We need to be on watch and not allow the situation to dictate to us how we might act.

We've all found ourselves in the situation of trying to remain calm and in control, only to find that the person stirring us has touched on a raw emotional or personal nerve. We try to "be Christian" about it, but allow ourselves to be drawn in. We then go through the inner struggle of feeling we've let ourselves down and compromised our spiritual integrity by reacting to the situation rather than responding.

Guilt builds up and we leave the encounter frustrated with ourselves because we hoped to be in control and keep a level head and quiet heart. Yet the situation deteriorated and we fell into the trap of over-reacting. Outwardly we might've kept some composure, but inwardly we failed to keep our peace intact. Sound familiar?

Usually this is an indication that we've been unprepared, or at least not prepared in the right manner. While I'm all in favour of spontaneous "arrow prayers" to the Lord in a moment of need, it's not good enough to simply rely on these for ongoing inner peace and self-control. We need more preparation than that. We need the mercies of the Lord at the beginning of each day, for He has promised this to us.

Through the Lord's mercies we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness. *Lamentations 3: 22-23*

The meaning of "new every morning" actually means "to receive fresh mercies each and every new day". What a thought: the Lord's intention is that by turning our focus upon Him as each new day begins we receive the fresh mercies made available for that particular day! Nothing is stale in God and nothing is ever second-hand quality. Everything is brand new, freshly given, and can be appropriated for that particular day or need. Such is the bounty of our limitless God.

Spending time with Him like this will lay a foundation from which to build as the day goes on. Some situations may allow us the luxury of spending a quiet time in personal preparation before a face-to-face encounter with someone. But other situations will pop up out of the blue. It's these in particular that will require us to draw from the well of peace deep inside.

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