

Guarding the Heart

By Leo Chan

The human heart is a place of profound mystery. The heart is where we have the capacity to experience life, emotion and feelings. The heart is where our wills and desires lay; it's the core of what drives us to do the things we do. The heart is where the human spirit is. The heart is also our source of life; it is at the core of who we are. The heart is also very vulnerable. It can be swayed and deceived if we aren't careful. Koptak (2003) describes the heart as "the seat of intentions, thoughts, and emotions ... [it serves] as the control centre for the rest of human anatomy" (p. 149-150).

Knowing this, the believer's heart is a key area of attack. Gregory Boyd, author of *God At War*, writes, "the heart of the believer is a battlefield as well ... the enemy is constantly present, seeking to gain an entrance into the believer's life" (p. 279). In the wisdom literature, we are given a direct instruction to guard our heart. Proverbs 4:23 [NIV] says, "above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life" or translated in another way, "above all else, guard your heart, for it affects everything you do" (Proverbs 4:23 [NLT]).

This Bible study will examine the issues of the heart. We will take a look at how the enemy attacks our heart and we can guard ourselves from those things.

How the Enemy Attacks

The enemy works in a variety of ways to attack the believer's heart. We will examine a few of these methods in the following section.

Unforgiveness

"One of Satan's "designs" is apparently to cause believers to harbor unforgiveness. This again gives the devil a "room" in the believer's heart" (Boyd, 1997, p. 279). The reason why unforgiveness gives the devil room is because unforgiveness is rooted in sin. Unforgiveness can result from selfishness, anger, pride, bitterness, and hatred. Often unforgiveness is a result of too much self-focus. It is true, that in certain circumstances, forgiveness can be incredibly

difficult because of the pain that was caused. But being unwilling to even step foot on the road to forgiveness is not what we are commanded to do. We are to forgive each other, just as God forgave us (cf. Colossians 3:13). We must remember that forgiveness is a process and that forgiveness is not forgetting about what happened in our past. Forgiveness is releasing the sting of the hurt, so it no longer has mastery over us. If we don't forgive, the pain, the resentment, the bitterness, and the hurt will always reside with us. You can be sure the devil will seek to amplify our wounds and fester the wound as much as possible. The devil's only purpose is to "steal and kill and destroy" (John 10:10, NIV).

Q: Have you ever been in a situation of unforgiveness? What happened? Were there any consequences of those actions?

Temptation

Clinton Arnold, author of *3 Crucial Questions About Spiritual Warfare*, writes that "the classic way Satan operates is by enticing believers to sin ... according to John, this has been one of the devil's primary modes of operation since the beginning" (p. 97). Now, this is not to say that the enemy is the sole cause of temptation. Our own flesh (sin nature) is also part of the equation. James writes about the process and factors of temptation in James 1:14 [NIV], "each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed" or translated in another way, "temptation comes from the lure of our own evil desires" [NLT]. Temptation affects every believer, but we do not have TO lose heart. 1 Cor 10:13 [NIV] says, "God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it." However, if we do not stand up to temptation, we give the devil room. Arnold (2005) writes "to succumb to the temptation and fail to appropriate the power of the indwelling Spirit of God is to surrender space in one's heart for the devil to occupy and exercise control" (p. 98).

Q: Since Satan uses temptation as a major way of causing us to sin, it's important for us to know where we are weakest. This is different for everybody. Can you think of areas in your life where you are particularly vulnerable? How can you protect yourself from these things?

Deceit/Falsehood

The enemy uses tactics of deceit and falsehood to attack our hearts. The way he does this is through our emotions. Because emotions are experienced deep within the heart, they can have a profound influence on our mind and our spirit. If the enemy can get a foothold into the heart through deception and lies, he can twist what is true. It is easy to be consumed by our emotions if we are not careful. We will talk more about how to guard our hearts against this later.

How Do We Guard our Hearts?

Guard your heart for it is the wellspring of life (cf. Proverbs 4:23). Guarding the heart is not passive, nor is it a one-time deal. To be on guard, means that we are actively protecting and actively defending. Great effort must be dedicated to the task because the heart, as the writer suggests, is of great value and importance. The idea of guarding here is like “protecting a treasure, a keeping of what is important, neither losing it nor abandoning it” (Koptak, 2003, p. 154) for the heart is subject to harm and/or attack from external factors (i.e. the enemy, other people). As we've discussed, the heart of the believer is a battlefield because the enemy knows just how crucial our heart is. He will try to do whatever he can to gain entrance into our lives.

Here are a few suggestions that can help us guard our hearts from allowing the enemy a foothold into our lives.

Receive wise teachings.

Koptak (2003) writes, “in Proverbs, wise people guard their hearts, not only by keeping harmful influences out but, more important, by putting wise teachings in and keeping them there” (p. 154). He suggests that we keep teachings in our hearts by memorizing Scripture. The test of knowing if teachings are kept in the heart is through action. If we can act upon what we have heard and memorized, then those things are truly in the heart.

Q: How often do you receive wise teachings and store them in your heart? Do you regularly memorize Scripture? Do you regularly act on the things you've learnt?

Be careful of idolatry.

Idolatry can be defined as anything that takes the place of God in our lives. Idolatry can take the form of anything, from religion, to people, to things (like food, television, drugs). One of the Ten Commandments speaks about idolatry, Exodus 20:3 [NIV] says, "you shall have no other gods before me." In our culture today, it is especially easy for things of the world to become idols: our career, money, materialism, our own comfort, to list a few. If we desire and chase these things constantly, if we are consumed by these things, it is most likely they have become our idols. Also, if we turn to something other than God as our primary means of comfort, encouragement, strength, support, we should be wary. The devil knows how easily we can be taken by the things of the world and how easily we rely on the things of the world. He will work at making things of this world seem pleasant to the eye (like he did with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden), benefiting us, amplifying their reliability, deceiving us in thinking that these things lead to life. We need to be especially careful of these things. Matthew 6:21 [NIV] says, "for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." God is the only One that should reign in our hearts, unrivalled, unmatched by anyone or anything in life. God hates idolatry. He is a jealous God (cf. Deut 6:15).

Q: What do you desire in life?

Q: Who/what do you first turn to in times of joy, in times of pain and sadness?

Q: How do you spend most of your time?

Be careful of our emotions.

While our feelings and emotions can be an excellent indicator at deeper issues in our lives, we must always be mindful of them. Our emotions can easily cloud our judgment if we let them, especially when the intensity of our emotions are high. There are countless examples of how people have done things they've regretted because of anger. We've heard of scenarios of people

flying into a “blind rage.” We need to remember that the devil is bent on bringing deceit and falsehood into our lives. He will always try to cloud what is true. Also, it’s important to realize that our hearts and our minds are inter-linked. Things that are experienced in our hearts will inadvertently affect our mind, our perceptions, our reality.

All this being said, if we notice that the intensity of our emotions are high, we must be careful. We cannot allow our emotions to take over and run wild because they can lead to sin. We need to acknowledge their presence and give them over to God because emotions, like anything, will grow in ever-increasing measure if we let them. Paul talks about this in Ephesians 4:26-27 [NIV], “Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold.” Paul realizes that anger is an emotion that gives the devil foothold if it is not dealt with immediately. For example, harboring anger in our hearts can lead to resentment, unforgiveness, bitterness, selfishness, and a lack of love. If we deal with it immediately, we stop this process from happening. This is a principle that we need to keep close to our hearts.

Q: Have you ever let your emotions “run wild”? What happened in the situation? How can you guard against this?

Be careful of our desires.

We discussed earlier about how the enemy uses temptation to entice us and lead us away from God, but how the enemy is not the sole cause of temptation. Our own flesh can also lead us into sin. Our flesh can be described as the evil desires that exist within us. 1 Peter 2:11 [NIV] says, “Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul.” Galatians 5:19-21 provides a list of consequences (though nowhere exhaustive) of following our flesh. We must be careful not to gratify the desires of our sinful nature, for a man reaps what he sows (cf. Galatians 6:7). In and of ourselves, we cannot do this. We need to ask the Spirit to help and fill us. When we live by the Spirit, we will not gratify our desires (cf. Galatians 5:16-17).

Closing Words

While our discussion about guarding the heart has been more of a practical nature, we need to remember that the battle we fight is not our battle and that we cannot do it on our own.

Arnold (2005) writes, “we are in the midst of a struggle that is far greater than us, but is it not bigger than our God” (p. 23). As humans, we are not strong enough to withstand the enemy.

The odds are stacked against us (Arnold, 2005). Arnold (2005) continues saying that “we need Christ not only to free us from the irresistible pull of these forces [our flesh, the world and the enemy], but then to help us on our Christian journey. We simply cannot live the Christian life by exerting more effort” (p. 36). We need to ask for the Spirit’s help. Christ conquered Satan on the Cross and in Him we have the victory. As believers, we have to do our part in the spiritual war, but we also need, and so much more so, the enabling power of Christ.

Bibliography

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