

Guard Your Heart

Above all else, guard your heart,
for it is the wellspring of life. – Proverbs 4:23

The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure.
Who can understand it? – Jeremiah 17:9

The source of much sin is the fallen human heart. This is because the heart is the springboard of our choices. In the Bible, the word “heart” is used almost 900 times and hardly ever in the literal sense of describing an internal organ that serves as the pump for the human circulatory system. It is almost exclusively a metaphorical reference which describes the inner being of a man – his affections, his intellect and his reason. The heart is the birthplace of our desires, our wills and, ultimately, our actions.

Why do we so easily fall into sin? It is because almost by reflex we tend to trust our gut (our heart) more than we train ourselves to pursue the mind of God so as to trust and obey Him no matter what. The problem with this reflex is that our hearts are desperately untrustworthy. Because of the fallen heart, we can validate behavior that is overtly disobedient to the will of God. All the more sinister is how that same heart can lead us to undertake outwardly noble, useful and righteous endeavors, but with self-serving motives. The fallen human heart is the breeding ground of all religious hypocrisy.

Jesus harshly indicted the Pharisees even though they were constantly engaged in tithing and almsgiving. But, people were fed by the almsgiving of the Pharisees. The various religious and civil ministries of the temple were fully funded. What was there for Jesus to complain about? He recognized that at the core of such upstanding religion was a desire to be seen and admired by others. Once they were seen, which was the only true desire of their hearts, they could consider themselves to be fully rewarded since there was no real passion for advancing the eternal Kingdom of God involved. On a purely secular level, even generosity from mixed motives is better than no generosity at all, but it is not the generosity of heart that pleases God.

Of course, deceitful hearts were not stumbling blocks solely for ancient Pharisees. There are numerous possible motives behind any act of kindness we might perform today. We can be kind to a second party so as to be admired by a third party. We can be kind so as to secure future support. Or, we can be kind because it reflects Christ in us to be kind. In fact, our hearts are so deceitful that conflicting motives for a single good deed can abide simultaneously.

The Russian dissident, Alexandr Solzhenitsyn wisely observed:

Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line dividing good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either, but right through every human heart.

So, how do we guard something so deceitful and unreliable as our hearts? A good place to start is to confess the truthfulness of the scriptural assessment of our hearts. To guard our hearts, we must acknowledge our profound dependency upon Jesus in all matters pertaining to righteousness. We must begin by thanking God that we stand in fellowship with Him because of the goodness of Jesus that covers us whenever the Father gazes upon us.

Beyond this basic premise that the righteousness of Christ covers us, we can begin to take steps to control the world's input to our senses. We will not necessarily be able to prevent our eyes from seeing bad things, but that danger can be more than offset if we will permeate our minds with God's Word.

"I have hidden your word in my heart
that I might not sin against you." - Psalm 119:11

Ultimately, the most reliable way to stand up under the assault of one's own deceitful heart is to abide in Christ, to abide in His Word and to surrender to the work of the Holy Spirit as He makes our hearts new.

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