

"Guard Your Heart"

One of my good friends growing up was a guy named Richie Beene. Although he only stood 5'6" and weighed less than 130 pounds, pound-for-pound, he was perhaps the toughest football player I have ever seen. In fact, he once put a lick on my rib cage that I can still feel today if I turn the right way! During our senior year, Richie was promoted to starting tailback. Knowing that defenders would be double his size and would attack the ball in his arms, the coach knew he could be prone to fumble. The coach devised an interesting practice drill to strengthen Richie's ball handling abilities. A long strap was tied around a football, and as Richie ran with the ball clutched against his chest, teammates ran behind him yanking on the other end of the strap. At the same time, other teammates on the line of scrimmage were smacking at the ball hoping to dislodge it from his grip. As Richie ran, he had to maintain a focus of guarding the football with all his might in order to keep from losing it. Richie had an incredible senior season, and I can still see ole' number 37 breaking through the line like Walter Payton and knocking down defenders twice his size. To the best of my recollection, I never saw Richie lose a fumble all season long.

Throughout the course of any given day, the experiences of life are repeatedly tugging upon our heartstrings. Our heart measures both the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat. Our heart feels the pains, the pleasures, and the pressures. Perhaps that would explain Solomon's word of wisdom and caution in Proverbs 4:23, "Keep [to guard] thy heart with all diligence, for out of it are the issues of life." The only things we take time to guard and protect are those things which hold true value and importance to us. We are quick to guard our family, our treasures, and our reputations, but how often do we consider guarding our heart? The Bible often refers to the heart, and it symbolizes our emotions, our intellect, and our will. So, why is this something so important that we guard it? God knows that what is on the inside is what matters most! Seventeenth century Scottish minister Robert Leighton wrote, "Solitude, silence, and the strait keeping of the heart, are the foundations and grounds of a spiritual life." We are told, "Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself," and his purity bred promotion. Nehemiah guarded the vision, "God put in my heart to do at Jerusalem," and his composed trust led to a completed task. The lesson should be clear to us; a guarded heart is the only kind of heart God can teach, tame, and trust. Consider why a guarded heart is such a necessity to our spiritual life.

An unguarded heart **has the potential to be wounded deeply**. Although Jesus had often declared the plan and purpose of His life to die on a cross, the disciples were still clinging to their selfish dreams and shallow desires. Having seen the power of His miracles and His message, they were not ready to let Him go. Once the hour of fulfillment was at hand, Jesus sensed their hurt and said to them in John 14:1, "Let not your heart be troubled..." Jesus knew that loving so freely comes with the risk of being hurt so deeply. Some of life's most difficult challenges come when we are unsuspectingly blind sided, betrayed, and broken by that in which we trusted. Imagine the depth insecurity Esau carried the rest of his life when Jacob swindled him out of his birthright. Imagine the depth of Samson's cries from the dungeon once Delilah betrayed the secret of his strength. Imagine the depth of vulnerability David felt when his son Absalom stole his throne. I once heard Warren Wiersbe say, "Anything that has the ability to bless me also possesses the ability to hurt me." It is not that God expects us to live with walls of suspicion, but rather that we live in the wisdom of the Spirit. An unguarded heart will always be an unbalanced heart that will carry a surprising amount of unnecessary scars.

An unguarded heart **has the propensity to wander disgracefully**. Again, Proverbs 4:23 states, "Keep [guard] thy heart with all diligence, for out of it are the issues of life." The word "issues" is more literally translated "boundaries." The very word conjures up images of legalism and limitations, but the exact opposite is true. When our children were toddlers, we blocked off rooms and stairways with baby gates and chairs. The purpose was not to restrain them with limitations, but rather to release them with freedom to enjoy an area protected by love. However, the depth of their understanding and obedience was tested anytime we left a gate open. The Lord is conscious of our dreams and desires, but He is also keenly aware of our depravity. A.W. Tozer said, "The neglected heart will soon be a heart overrun with worldly thoughts; the neglected life will soon become a moral chaos." It was an unguarded heart that led Adam and Eve into sin, Noah into drunkenness, Lot into worldliness, David into adultery, and Solomon into idolatry. A heart without boundaries is like a ship without anchor, and headed toward disaster. Until a man

knows exactly where he stands, he will never know exactly where he is going.

An unguarded heart **has the presumption to worship defectively**. In Jeremiah 29:13, God spoke through His prophet, "And ye shall seek Me, and find Me, when ye shall search for Me with all your heart." When it comes to what God expects and demands of our hearts it is nothing less than whole-hearted allegiance. It is all or nothing with God, and He is never impressed with partial devotion. The moment a heart is left unguarded, idols will contend for the throne. Idols are not always made of stone and wood. In fact, if there is anything you love more, fear more, serve more, or value more than God, then your heart has created an idol to worship. God will never accept the remains of sacrifices that have already been offered elsewhere. Seventeenth century French mathematician Blaise Pascal wrote, "There are two kinds of people one can call reasonable: those who serve God with all their heart because they know him, and those who seek Him with all their heart because they do not know Him." Jesus used explicit terms when it came to His defining how we are to follow Him. Again, it is all or nothing. An unguarded heart may want the best of both worlds, but it also runs the risk of losing the best of both worlds.

In Mark 8:17, Jesus asked a question that reveals the danger of an unguarded heart, "...Have ye your heart yet hardened?" An unguarded heart will ultimately become a hardened heart. Rather than aging gracefully, many lives have soured and spoiled over time. Through all the years of despair, deception, and disappointment, an unguarded heart merely learns to kill time and waste time. In the final analysis, it is simply a heart that fumbles away the golden opportunities of life.

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