

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, January 10, 2010**

GUARD YOUR HEART

Proverbs 4:18-27

I'm not a medical doctor, and I don't play one on TV. But I can tell you that, according to the American Heart Association, more than 80 million people in the United States – that is more than one out of every four Americans – have some form of cardiovascular disease, whether high blood pressure, coronary heart disease, stroke or heart failure. Coronary heart disease is the single leading cause of death in America, accounting for more than 425,000 deaths in 2006, the most recent year for which statistics are available. The Heart Association estimates that more than one million Americans (approximately 1.25 million) will have a new or recurrent heart attack this year. All told, cardiovascular diseases claimed more than 831,000 lives in 2006, accounting for slightly more than one-third of all deaths – more than cancer or accidents or AIDS or anything else you can think of.

Your heart matters. That is why we rejoice so heartily in Len Deibert's excellent recovery so far from his heart bypass surgery this past week. And we pray for his recovery to continue.

A healthy heart is essential to a healthy life. Your heart is crucially important to the health of your body. What is true with respect to our bodies is equally true in the spiritual realm. A strong and healthy heart – a heart that is connected to God in trusting faith, a heart that is alive in the grace and love and truth of God – is essential to your spiritual health and wellbeing.

The word *heart* occurs nearly 800 times in the Bible. The New Testament word for *heart* is the Greek word *kardia*, from which we get, among other things, the word *cardiologist*, which is the designation for a heart specialist (like our own Robert McSwain). In the Bible, the word *heart* refers not just to the physical organ that pumps blood in the body and is the center of our physical life, but also, in a spiritual sense, to the seat or center of a person's will, emotions, desires, and affections. It is the source and center of our spiritual life.

Proverbs 4:23 refers to the heart as the “wellspring” of life. That is, the heart is the starting point, it is the source from which our attitudes and actions, our thoughts and words flow. So essential is the heart to our spiritual wellbeing that God's Word says to us: “Above all else, guard your heart” (Proverbs 4:23).

The *New Living Translation* (NLT) of this verse says: “Above all else, guard your heart, for it affects everything you do.”

The Message paraphrase says: “Keep vigilant watch over your heart; *that's* where real life starts.”

Today's English Version (TEV) has: “Be careful how you think; your life is shaped by your thoughts.”

And the *English Standard Version* (ESV) says: “Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life.”

“Above all else, guard your heart.” There is nothing, absolutely nothing more important in your life than the spiritual condition of your heart or the state of your soul.

If you turn to the Gospels in the New Testament, you find that Jesus was often, if not always, in conflict with the Pharisees. The Pharisees were staunch, devoted defenders of both the Jewish law and the tradition which had been handed down from one generation to the next by the rabbis. And they would have made good Presbyterians – in this regard, at least – because they did everything “decently and in order” (1 Corinthians 14:40). The problem was that in their pursuit of holiness, they elevated their own rules and regulations, their own ideas and man-made traditions, to such a place of importance that they lost sight of what God wanted. Instead of keeping the main thing the main thing, they majored in minors. They lost sight of the main thing, which is to glorify God with a heart of trusting faith. They reduced their religion to a mind-boggling list of do’s and don’ts. They missed the fact that true religion is not about rules, it is about a relationship. It is about a relationship with God born of faith, not works.

The conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees came to a head on one occasion when the Pharisees complained that the disciples of Jesus were eating with unclean hands. If you want to check it out for yourself, you can read about it in both Matthew 15 and Mark 7. It wasn’t that the disciples’ hands were dirty. It wasn’t a matter of personal hygiene that the Pharisees were so concerned about. They were upset that the disciples of Jesus didn’t wash their hands “the right way” before they sat down to eat. The disciples didn’t follow the tradition of ceremonial hand-washing which had been handed down by the rabbis over many generations. That is what the Pharisees were so upset about.

But here is the difference between Jesus and the Pharisees. The Pharisees were obsessed with unclean hands and the proper way to wash. Jesus, on the other hand, was concerned with the condition of a person’s heart. They were preoccupied with rituals and the way things looked on the outside. What mattered to Jesus – and what matters to Him today – is the inside. It is the heart with which Jesus is most concerned, because the heart is the wellspring, the center and source from which all of life flows.

The Pharisees believed that the way to gain favor with God, the way to be judged righteous in God’s sight, was by a rigorous and vigorous obedience to all the laws and traditions of the Jewish faith. They thought the way to gain acceptance with God was to devote themselves to the ritual observances of the law. They thought if you went to church every week, if you didn’t violate the rules for keeping the Sabbath, if you tithed religiously, if you fasted regularly, if you read the Bible and prayed every day, if you were careful to observe all the dietary regulations about what was kosher and what was not, if you carried out all the rituals prescribed in the law and expanded in minute detail in the tradition, you would be accepted by God. God would be pleased with you. And you would receive your reward.

But Jesus said the Pharisees had missed the point. He said it is not what you eat or don't eat that matters most. It is not whether or how you wash your hands that is most important. It is not a question of following the right rituals or going through the correct motions. It is not the outward appearance that counts with God. What matters most with God is what is in your heart. The Lord made this clear to Samuel when He chose David, the youngest of Jesse's sons, to succeed Saul as king over Israel, instead of any of David's older brothers. Samuel was impressed with Eliab, David's oldest brother. He was sure Eliab was the one God had chosen to be king. But the Lord said: "Do not consider his appearance or his height for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7).

The heart is what matters to God.

The Pharisees were masters at going through the motions. They could probably carry out their rituals in their sleep. But Jesus had this to say about them in Mark 7:6-7:

"Isaiah was right about you when he prophesied about you hypocrites.

As it is written:

'These people honor me with their lips,

but their hearts are far from me.

They worship me in vain;

their teachings are but rules taught by men'" (Isaiah 29:13).

I hope Jesus would never have any reason to say that about me. Or about us.

Jesus accused them of being hypocrites. Ray Stedman once observed that there are two kinds of hypocrisy. The first consists of using the right words but harboring wrong attitudes. We know all the right words to say, but our hearts are far from God. When we talk about love but don't love, that is hypocrisy. When we talk about forgiveness but fail to forgive, that is hypocrisy. When we talk about grace but refuse to show grace, that is hypocrisy.

The second kind of hypocrisy is when we clothe our own worldly, unbiblical philosophies and values in biblical or "Christian" language. We give the impression that we are living for God, but we are really living for ourselves. We go to church and act religious on Sundays, but our minds and hearts are on other things. It is all an act. That is a form of hypocrisy. And we are all capable of it.

What determines our relationship with God is not the external appearance we give or the rituals we observe, but what is in our heart. The rituals only have meaning and value when they flow from the inner life of the soul.

We all know that a healthy diet *does* make a difference in a person's life. What you eat or don't eat can contribute significantly to your physical wellbeing or your sense of dis-ease. And it *does* matter to God how we take care of our bodies. Your life – every life – is a precious gift from God. Your body is meant to be a temple of the Holy Spirit, a place where God Himself desires to reside by His Spirit. 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 says: "Don't you know

that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.”

You and I do not belong to ourselves. We are not autonomous creatures who can do with our bodies whatever we want whenever we want. We belong to God. And we are responsible to God for the way we take care of our bodies and minds. How we care for our bodies matters to God. What we put into these bodies matters to the One who designed us and created us and redeemed us.

But what we eat, Jesus said, cannot pollute our souls. It is not eating “unclean food” or eating with “unclean hands” that defiles a person. It is sin that pollutes our hearts and destroys our fellowship with God. And sin is not a matter of rituals or ceremonies or traditions. Sin is a moral issue. A matter of the heart. And so is righteousness, which means being in a right relationship with God. Righteousness is not something we achieve by our adherence to the commands of God and the traditions of the law. It is something we receive, as the righteousness of Christ our Savior is imputed to us through saving faith in Him.

Jesus went on to say that what pollutes our souls is what comes out of our hearts. The heart is the wellspring and source of every kind of sin imaginable. In Mark 7:21-23, Jesus said that it is from within, out of our hearts, that evil thoughts, sexual immorality (Greek *porneia*), theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness (open and shameless immorality), envy, slander (Greek *blasphemia*, which refers to speaking evil either of God or another person), arrogance and folly come. From the heart.

Satan wants to steal your heart. He wants to seduce your heart. He wants to turn your heart away from God. He wants to displace God from the throne of your life and replace Him with something else. Anything else.

So, guard your heart. Guard your heart against all the poisons Jesus pinpointed in Mark 7.

Guard your heart against pride, which has been the downfall of an inestimable number of people.

Guard your heart against Pharisaic legalism.

Guard your heart against the hypocrisy of pretending to be something you are not.

Guard your heart against greed and envy.

Guard your heart against the lure of lust.

Guard your heart against idolatry of any kind.

Guard your heart against unrighteous anger.

Guard your heart against becoming impatient with God.

Guard your heart against discouragement.

Guard your heart against doubt.

Guard your heart against worry, which exposes a lack of trust in God.

Satan would use any of these he could in your life to hinder or even paralyze you spiritually. So, guard your heart. Don't give Satan even an inch in your life.

How can you guard your heart? One way you can guard your heart is by keeping God's Word there. Psalm 119:11 says: "I have hidden Your word in my heart that I may not sin against You."

Someone has said: "God's Word will keep you from sin, or sin will keep you from God's Word." There is wisdom there. If you memorize Scripture, it will be a powerful weapon in your arsenal as you contend with the attacks of the evil one. Our Well-Versed Kids Bible memory program is a great way for kids to do it. There are programs for adults, too.

How can you guard your heart? Another way you can guard your heart is by guarding your eyes and your ears. You can guard your heart by keeping your eyes focused on Jesus. Proverbs 4:25 tells us to keep our eyes fixed straight ahead. Keep your eyes on the Lord Jesus and the path He has laid out for you.

Sin sometimes looks really attractive, doesn't it? But when you've got your eyes on Jesus and the price He paid for your redemption, sin doesn't look nearly so pretty.

You can guard your heart, too, by watching your step. Be careful where you go. Verse 26 says: "Take only ways that are firm." And verse 27: "Do not turn to the right or the left; keep your foot from evil." If you want to guard your heart, be careful where you go. There are some places you shouldn't go as a follower of Christ and some things you shouldn't do. Don't go there. That includes where you can go on the internet. If you have developed a habit of going places on the internet you shouldn't go, if you find yourself battling a temptation – or giving in to the temptation – to go there, ask a brother or sister in Christ to come along side you, to keep you accountable, to help you resist and overcome in the power of Christ.

How can you guard your heart? By taking to heart what Paul says in Colossians 3:1-2: "Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things."

Where is the Lord Jesus seated at the right hand of God? In heaven. So, think about heaven. Remember that this world is not our home. Everything here is destined to die or decay. Make sure you're prepared for heaven so that when the time comes for you to die, all you have to do is die. And live your life here on earth not for fame or fortune or the accolades of men, but for the applause of heaven (to the glory of God).

How can you guard your heart? You can guard your heart by the coronation of Christ on the throne of your heart. Peter said: "In your hearts set apart Christ as Lord" (1 Peter 3:15). Crown Him as Lord of your life, and depend on Him to protect and defend you when you come under attack or find yourself in a hard place. Let your heart be Christ's home. Every moment of every day in every situation.

How can you guard your heart? You can guard your heart by taking the prayer of David in Psalm 139 and making it your own:

“Search me, O God, and know my heart;” (He does.)

“Test me and know my anxious thoughts.

See if there is any offensive way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.”

-Psalm 139:23-24

Your heart matters to God. So, above all else, guard your heart, for it is the spring out of which all of life flows.

Lord, let it be so, to the glory of Your name. Amen.