

PRACTICAL CHRISTIANITY Part 2: Progress in the Christian Life Chapter 4 HEART WORK

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Transcript

PRACTICAL CHRISTIANITY

Part 2: Progress in the Christian Life

Chapter 4

HEART WORK

As well might a poor man expect to be rich in this world without industry, or a weak man to become strong and healthy without food and exercise, as a Christian to be rich in faith and strong in the Lord without earnest endeavour and diligent effort. It is true that all our labours amount to nothing unless the Lord blesses them (Ps. 127:1), as it also is that apart from Him we can do nothing (John 15:5). Nevertheless, God places no premium upon sloth, and has promised that "the soul of the diligent shall be made fat" (Prov. 13:4). A farmer may be fully persuaded of his own helplessness to make his fields productive, he may realize that their fertility is dependent upon the sovereign will of God, and he may also be a firm believer in the efficacy of prayer; but unless he discharges his own duty his barns will be empty. So it is spiritually. God has not called His people to be drones, nor to maintain an attitude of passiveness. No, He bids them work, toil, labour. The sad thing is that so many of them are engaged in the wrong task, or, at least, giving most of their attention to that which is incidental, and neglecting that which is essential and fundamental. "Keep thy heart with all diligence" (Prov. 4:23): this is the great task which God has assigned unto each of His children. But oh, how sadly is the heart neglected! Of all their concerns and possessions, the least diligence is used by the vast majority of professing Christians in the keeping of their hearts. As long as they safeguard their other interests—their reputations, their bodies, their positions in the world—the heart may be left to take its own course. As the heart in our physical body is the center and fountain of life, because from it blood circulates into every part, conveying with it either health or disease, so it is with us spiritually. If our heart be the residence of impiety, pride, avarice, malice, impure lusts, then the whole current of our lives will largely be tainted with these vices. If they are admitted there and prevail for a season, then our character and conduct will be proportionately affected. Therefore the citadel of the heart needs above all things to be well guarded, that it may not be seized by those numerous and watchful assailants which are ever attacking it. This spring needs to be well protected that its waters be not poisoned. The man is what his heart is. If this be dead to God, then nothing in him is alive. If this be right with God, all will be right. As the mainspring of a watch sets all its wheels and parts in motion, so as a man

"thinketh in his heart, so is he" (Prov. 23:7). If the heart be right, the actions will be. As a man's heart is, such is his state now and will be hereafter: if it be regenerated and sanctified there will be a life of faith and holiness in this world, and everlasting life will be enjoyed in the world to come. Therefore, "Rather look to the cleansing of thine heart, than to the cleansing of thy well; rather look to the feeding of thine heart, than to the feeding of thy Hock; rather look to the defending of thine heart, than to the defending of thine house; rather look to the keeping of thine heart, than to the keeping of thy money" (Peter Moffat, 1570). "Keep thy heart with all diligence, for Out of it arc the issues of life" (Prov. 4:23). The "heart" is here put for our whole inner being, the "hidden man of the heart" (1 Pet. 3:4). It is that which controls and gives character to all that we do. To "keep"—garrison or guard—the heart or soul is the great work which God has assigned us: the enablement is His, but the duty is ours. We are to keep the imagination from vanity, the understanding from error, the will from perverseness, the conscience clear of guilt, the affections from being inordinate and set on evil objects, the mind from being employed on worthless or vile subjects; the whole from being possessed by Satan. This is the work to which God has called us. Rightly did the Puritan John Flavel say, "The keeping and right managing of the heart in every condition is the great business of a Christian's life." Now to "keep" the heart right implies that it has been set right. Thus it was at regeneration, when it was given a new spiritual bent. True conversion is the heart turning from Satan's control to God's, from sin to holiness, from the world to Christ. To keep the heart right signifies the constant care and diligence of the renewed to preserve his soul in that holy frame to which grace has reduced it and daily strives to hold it. "Hereupon do all events depend: the heart being kept, the whole course of our life here will be according to the mind of God, and the end of it will be the enjoyment of Him hereafter. This being neglected, life will be lost, both here as unto obedience, and hereafter as to glory" (John Owen in Causes of Apostasy). 1. To "keep" the heart means striving to shut out from it all that is opposed to God. "Little children, keep yourselves from idols" (1 John 5:21). God is a jealous God and will brook no rival; He claims the throne of our hearts, and requires to be loved by us supremely. When we perceive our affections being inordinately drawn Out unto any earthly object, we are to fight against it, and "resist the devil." When Paul said, "All things are lawful unto me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any" (1 Cor. 6:12), he signified that he was keeping his heart diligently, that he was jealous lest things should gain that esteem and place in his soul which was due alone unto the Lord. A very small object placed immediately before the eye is sufficient to shut out the light of the sun, and trifling things taken up by the affections may soon sever communion with the Holy One. Before regeneration our hearts were deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked (Jer. 17:9): that was because the evil principle, the "flesh," had complete dominion over them. But inasmuch as "the flesh" remains in us after conversion, and is constantly striving for the mastery over "the spirit," the Christian needs to exercise a constant watchful jealousy over his heart, mindful of its readiness to be imposed upon, and its proneness unto a compliance with temptations. All the avenues to the heart need to be carefully guarded so that nothing hurtful enters therein, particularly against vain thoughts and imaginations, and especially in those seasons when they are apt to gain an advantage. For if injurious thoughts are suffered to gain an inroad into the mind, if we accustom ourselves to give them entertainment, then in vain shall we hope to be "spiritually minded" (Rom. 8:6). All such thoughts are only making provision to fulfil the lusts of the flesh. Thus, for the Christian to "keep" his heart with all diligence means for him to pay close attention to the direction in which his affections are moving, to discover whether the things of the world are gaining a firmer and fuller hold over him or whether they are increasingly losing their charm for him. God has exhorted us, "Set your affections on things above, not on things on the earth" (Col. 3:2), and the heeding of this injunction calls for constant examination of the heart to discover whether or not it is becoming more and more dead unto this deceitful and perishing world, and whether heavenly things are those in which we

find our chief and greatest delight. "Take heed to thyself, and keep thy soul diligently, lest thou forget the things which thine eyes have seen, and lest they depart from thy heart" (Deut. 4:9). 2. To "keep" the heart means striving to bring it into conformity with the Word. We are not to rest content until an actual image of its pure and holy teachings is stamped upon it. Alas, so many today are just playing with the solemn realities of God, allowing them to flit across their fancy, but never embracing and making them their own. Why is it, dear reader, that those solemn impressions you had when hearing a searching sermon or reading a searching article so quickly faded away? Why did not those holy feelings and aspirations which were stirred within you last? Why have they borne no fruit? Was it not because you failed to see that your heart was duly affected by them? You failed to "hold fast" that which you had "received and heard" (Rev. 3:3), and in consequence your heart became absorbed again in "the care of this life" or "the deceitfulness of riches," and thus the Word was choked. It is not enough to hear or read a powerful message from one of God's servants, and to be deeply interested and stirred by it. If there be no diligent effort on your part, then it will be said that "your goodness is as a morning cloud, and as the early dew it goeth away" (Hosea 6:4). What, then, is required? This: earnest and persevering prayer that God will fasten the message in your soul as a nail in a sure place, so that the Devil himself cannot catch it away. What is required? This: "Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart" (Luke 2:19). Things which are not duly pondered are soon forgotten: meditation stands to reading as mastication does to eating. What is required? This: that you promptly put into practice what you have learned, walk according to the light God has given, or it will quickly be taken from you (Luke 8:18). Not only must the outward actions be regulated by the Word, but the heart must also be conformed thereto. It is not enough to abstain from murder, the causeless anger must be put away. It is not enough to abstain from the act of adultery, the inward lust must be mortified too (Matt. 5:28). God not only takes note of and keeps a record of all our external conduct, but He "weighteth the spirits" (Prov. 16:2). Not only so, He requires us to scrutinize the springs from which our actions proceed, to examine our motives, to ponder the spirit in which we act. God requires truth—that is sincerity, reality—in "the inward parts" (Ps. 51:6). Therefore does He command us, "Keep thy heart with all diligence, for out of it are the issues of life." 3. To "keep" the heart means to preserve it tender unto sin. The unregenerate man makes little or no distinction between sin and crime; as long as he keeps within the law of the land, and maintains a reputation for respectability among his fellows, he is, generally speaking, quite satisfied with himself. But it is far otherwise with one who has been born again: he has been awakened to the fact that he has to do with God, and must yet render a full account unto Him. He makes conscience of a hundred things which the unconverted never trouble themselves about. When the Holy Spirit first convicted him he was made to feel that his whole life had been one of rebellion against God, of pleasing himself. The consciousness of this pierced him to the quick: his inward anguish far exceeded any pains of body or sorrow occasioned by temporal losses. He saw himself to be a spiritual leper, and hated himself for it, and mourned bitterly before God. He cried, "Hide Thy face from my sins, and blot out all mine iniquities. Create in me a clean heart., O God; and renew a right spirit within me" (Ps. 51:9, 10). Now it is the duty of the Christian, and part of the task which God has set him, to see to it that this sense of the exceeding sinfulness of sin be not lost. He is to labour daily that his heart be duly affected by the heinousness of self-will and self-love. He is steadfastly to resist every effort of Satan to make him pity himself, think lightly of wrongdoing, or excuse himself in the same. He is to live in the constant realization that the eye of God is ever upon him, so that when tempted he will say with Joseph, "How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" (Gen. 39:9). He is to view sin in the light of the cross, daily reminding himself that it was his iniquities which caused the Lord of glory to be made a curse for him; employing the dying love of Christ as a motive why he must not allow himself in anything that is contrary to the holiness and obedience which the Saviour asks from all His redeemed. Ah, my Christian

reader, it is no child's play to "keep the heart with all diligence." The easy-going religion of our day will never take its devotees (or rather its victims!) to heaven. The question has been asked, "Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? or who shall stand in His Holy place?" and plainly has the question been answered by God Himself: "He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart," etc. (Ps. 24:3, 4). Equally plain is the teaching of the New Testament, "Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God" (Matt. 5:8). A "pure heart" is one that hates sin, which makes conscience of sin, which grieves over it, which strives against it. A "pure heart" is one that seeks to keep undefiled the temple of the Holy Spirit, the dwelling-place of Christ (Eph. 3:17). 4. To "keep" the heart means to look diligently after its cleansing. Perhaps some of our readers often find themselves sorrowfully crying, "Oh, the vileness of my heart!" Thank God if He has discovered this to you. But, dear friend, there is no sufficient reason why your "heart" should continue to be vile. You might lament that your garden was overgrown with weeds and filled with rubbish; but need it remain so? We speak not now of your sinful nature, the incurable and unchangeable "flesh" which still indwells you; but of your "heart," which God bids you "keep." You are responsible to purge your mind of vain imaginations, your soul of unlawful affections, your conscience of guilt. But, alas, you say, "I have no control over such things: they come unbidden and I am powerless to prevent them." So the Devil would have you believe! Revert again to the analogy of your garden. Do not the weeds spring up unbidden? Do not the slugs and other pests seek to prey upon the plants? What, then? Do you merely bewail your helplessness? No, you resist them, and take means to keep them under. Thieves enter houses uninvited, but whose fault is it if the doors and windows be left unfastened? Oh, heed not the seductive lullabies of Satan. God says, "Purify your hearts, ye double minded" (James 4:8); that is, one mind for Him, and another for self! one for holiness, and another for the pleasures of sin. But how am I to "purify" my heart? By vomiting up the foul things taken into it, shamefacedly owning them before God, repudiating them, turning from them with loathing; and it is written, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." By daily renewing our exercise of repentance, and such repentance as is spoken of in 2 Corinthians 7:11; "for behold this selfsame thing, that ye sorrowed after a godly sort, what carefulness it wrought in you, yea, what clearing of yourselves, yea, what indignation, yea, what fear, yea, what vehement desire, yea, what zeal, yea, what revenge! In all things ye have approved yourselves to be clear in this matter." By the daily exercise of faith (Acts 15:9), appropriating afresh the cleansing blood of Christ, bathing every night in that "fountain" which has been opened "for sin and uncleanness" (Zech. 13:1). By treading the path of God's commandments: "Seeing ye have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit" (1 Pet. 1:22). We now point Out what is obvious to every Christian reader, namely that such a task calls for Divine aid. Help and grace need to be earnestly and definitely sought of the Holy Spirit each day. We should bow before God, and in all simplicity say, "Lord, Thou requirest me to keep my heart with all diligence, and I feel utterly incompetent for such a task; such a work lies altogether beyond my poor feeble powers; therefore I humbly ask Thee in the name of Christ graciously to grant unto me supernatural strength to do as Thou hast bidden me. Lord, work in me both to will and to do of Thy good pleasure." "Man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart" (1 Sam. 16:7). How prone we are to be occupied with that which is evanescent, rather than with the things that abide; how ready to gauge things by our senses instead of by our rational powers. How easily we are deceived by that which is on the surface, forgetting that true beauty lies within. How slow we are to adopt God's way of estimating. Instead of being attracted by comeliness of physical features we should value moral qualities and spiritual graces. Instead of spending so much care, time and money on the adorning of the body we ought to devote our best attention to the developing and directing of the faculties of our souls. Alas, the vast majority of our fellows live as though they had no souls, and the average professing Christian gives little serious thought to the same. Yes, the Lord "looketh on the heart":

He sees its thoughts and intents, knows its desires and designs, beholds its motives and motions, and deals with us accordingly. The Lord discerns what qualities are in our hearts: what holiness and righteousness, what wisdom and prudence, what justice and integrity, what mercy and kindness. When such graces are lively and flourishing, then is fulfilled that verse, "My beloved is gone down into his garden, to the beds of spices, to feed in the gardens, and to gather lilies" (Song of Sol. 6:2). God esteems nothing so highly as holy faith, unfeigned love, and filial fear; in His sight a "meek and quiet spirit" is of "great price" (1 Pet. 3:4). The sincerity of our profession largely depends upon the care and conscience we have in keeping our hearts. A very searching example of this is found in 2 Kings 10:31, "But Jehu took no heed to walk in the law of the Lord God of Israel with all his heart." Those words are more solemn because of what is said of him in the previous verse: "And the Lord said unto Jehu, Because thou hast done well in executing that which is right in Mine eyes, and hast done unto the house of Ahab according unto all that was in Mine heart, thy children of the fourth generation shall sit on the throne of Israel." Jehu was partial in his reformation, which showed his heart was not right with God; he abhorred the worship of Baal which Ahab had fostered, but he tolerated the golden calves which Jeroboam had set up. He failed to put away all the evil. Ah, my reader, true conversion is not only turning away from gross sin, it is the heart forsaking all sin. There must be no reserve, for God will not allow any idol, nor must we. Jehu went so far, but he stopped short of the vital point; he put away evil, but he did not do that which was good. He heeded not the law of the Lord to walk in it "with all his heart." It is greatly to be feared that those who are heedless are graceless, for where the principle of holiness is planted in the heart it makes its possessor circumspect and desirous of pleasing God in all things—not from servile fear, but from grateful love; not by constraint, but freely; not occasionally, but constantly. "Keep thine heart with all diligence." Guard it jealously as the dwelling place of Him to whom you have given it. Guard it with the utmost vigilance, for not only is there the enemy without seeking entrance, but there is a traitor within desirous of dominion. The Hebrew for "with all diligence" literally rendered is "above all"; above all the concerns of our outward life, for, careful as we should be as to that, it is before the eyes of men, whereas the heart is the object of God's holy gaze. Then "keep" or preserve it more sedulously than your reputation, your body, your estate, your money. With all earnestness and prayer, labour that no evil desire prevails or abides there, avoiding all that excites lust, feeds pride, or stirs up anger, crushing the first emotions of such evils as you would the brood of a scorpion. Many people place great expectations in varied circumstances and conditions. One thinks he could serve God much better if he were more prospered temporally; another if he passed through the refining effects of poverty and affliction. One thinks his spirituality would be promoted if he could be more retired and solitary; another if only he could have more society and Christian fellowship. But, my reader, the only way to serve God better is to be content with the place in which He has put you, and therein get a better heart! We shall never enter into the advantages of any situation, nor overcome the disadvantages of any condition, until we fix and water the root of them in ourselves." Make the tree good, and the fruit good" (Matt. 12:33): get the heart right, and you will soon be superior unto all "circumstances." "But how can I get my heart right? Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots?" Answer: you are creating your own difficulty by confounding "heart" with "nature"; they are quite distinct. It is important to recognize this, for many are confused thereon. There has been such an undue emphasis upon the "two natures in the Christian" that often it has been lost sight of that the Christian is a person over and above his two natures. The Scriptures make the distinction clear enough. For example, God does not bid us keep our "nature," but He does our "hearts." We do not believe with our "nature," but we do with our "hearts" (Rom. 10:10). God never tells us to "rend" our nature (Joel 2:13), "circumcise" our nature (Deut. 10:6) or "purify" our nature (James 4:8), but He does our "hearts"! The "heart" is the very center of our responsibility, and to deny that we are to improve and keep it is to repudiate human accountability. It is the Devil who seeks

to persuade people that they are not responsible for the state of their hearts, and may no more change them than they can the stars in their courses. And the "flesh" within finds such a lie very agreeable to its case. But he who has been regenerated by the sovereign grace of God cannot, with the Scriptures before him, give heed unto any such delusion. While he has to deplore how sadly neglected is the great task which God has set before him, while he has to bemoan his wretched failure to make his heart what it ought to be, nevertheless he wants to do better; and after his duty has been pressed upon him he will daily seek grace better to discharge his duty, and instead of being totally discouraged by the difficulty and greatness of the work required he will cry the more fervently to the Holy Spirit for His enablement. The Christian who means business will labour to have a "willing" heart (Ex. 35:5), which acts spontaneously and gladly, not of necessity; a "perfect" heart (1 Chron. 29:9), sincere, genuine, upright; a "tender" heart (2 Chron. 34:26), yielding and pliable, the opposite of hard and stubborn; a "broken" heart (Ps. 34:18), sorrowing over all failure and sin; a "united" heart (Ps. 86:11), all the affections centered on God; an "enlarged" heart (Ps. 119:32), delighting in every part of Scripture and loving all God's people; a "sound" heart (Prov. 14:30), right in doctrine and practice; a "merry" heart (Prov. 15:15), rejoicing in the Lord alway; a "pure" heart (Matt. 5:8), hating all evil; an "honest and good heart" (Luke 8:15), free from guile and hypocrisy, willing to be searched through and through by the Word; a "single" heart (Eph. 6:5), desiring only God's glory; a "true" heart (Heb. 10:22), genuine in all its dealings with God.

The Time of Heart Work The duty of keeping the heart with the utmost diligence is binding upon the Christian at all times; there is no period or condition of life in which he may be excused from this work. Nevertheless, there are distinctive seasons, critical hours, which call for more than a common vigilance over the heart, and it is a few of these which we would now contemplate, seeking help from above to point out some of the most effectual aids unto the right accomplishment of the task God has assigned us. General principles are always needful and beneficial, yet details have to be furnished if we are to know how to apply them in particular circumstances. It is this lack of definiteness which constitutes one of the most glaring defects in so much modern ministry.

1. In times of prosperity. When providence smiles upon us and bestows temporal gifts with a lavish hand, then has the Christian urgent reason to keep his heart with all diligence, for that is the time we are apt to grow careless, proud, earthly. Therefore was Israel cautioned of old, "And it shall be, when the Lord thy God shall have brought thee into the land which He sware unto thy fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give thee great and goodly cities, which thou buildest not, and houses full of good things, which thou filledst not, and wells digged, which thou diggedst not, vineyards and olive trees, which thou plantedst not; when thou shalt have eaten and be full; then beware lest thou forget the Lord" (Deut. 6:10-12). Alas that they heeded not that exhortation. Many are the warnings furnished in Scripture. Of Uzziah it is recorded, "When he was strong, his heart was lifted up to his destruction" (2 Chron. 21:16). To the king of Tyre God said, "Thine heart is lifted up, because of thy riches" (Ezek. 28:5). Of Israel we read, "And they took strong cities, and a fat land, and possessed houses full of all goods, wells digged, vineyards and olive yards, and fruit trees in abundance: so they did eat, and were filled, and became fat, and delighted themselves in Thy great goodness. Nevertheless they were disobedient, and rebelled against Thee, and cast Thy law behind their backs, and slew Thy prophets which testified against them to turn them to Thee" (Neh. 9:25, 26). And again, "Of their silver and their gold have they made them idols" (Hosea 8:4). Sad indeed are the above passages, the more so because we have seen such a tragic repetition of them in our own days. Oh the earthly-mindedness which prevailed, the indulging of the flesh, the sinful extravagance, which were seen among professing Christians while "times were good!" How practical godliness waned, how the denying of self disappeared, how covetousness, pleasure and wantonness possessed the great majority of those calling themselves the people of God. Yet great as was their sin, far greater was that of most of the preachers, who, instead of warning, admonishing, rebuking, and setting before their people an example of

sobriety and thrift, criminally remained silent upon the crying sins of their hearers, and themselves encouraged the reckless spending of money and the indulgence of worldly lusts. How, then, is the Christian to keep his heart from these things in times of prosperity? First, seriously ponder the dangerous and ensnaring temptations which attend a prosperous condition, for very, very few of those who live in the prosperity and pleasures of this world escape eternal perdition. "It is easier [said Christ] for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 19:24). What multitudes have been carried to hell in the cushioned chariots of earthly wealth and ease, while a comparative handful have been shipped to heaven by the rod of affliction. Remember, too, that many of the Lord's own people have sadly deteriorated in seasons of worldly success. When Israel was in a low condition in the wilderness, then were they "holiness unto the Lord" (Jer. 2:3); but when fed in the fat pastures of Canaan they said, "We are lords; we will come no more unto Thee" (verse 31). Second, diligently seek grace to heed that word, "If riches increase, set not your heart upon them" (Ps. 62:10). Those riches may be given to try you; not only are they most uncertain things, often taking to themselves wings and flying swiftly away, but at best they cannot satisfy the soul, and only perish with the using. Remember that God values no man a jot more for these things: He esteems us by inward graces, and not by outward possessions: "In every nation he that feareth Him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with Him" (Acts 10:35). Third, urge upon your soul the consideration of that awful day of reckoning, wherein according to our receipt of mercies so shall be our accountings of them: "For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required" (Luke 12:48). Each of us must yet give an account of our stewardship.

2. In Times of adversity. When providence frowns upon us, overturning our cherished plans, and blasting our outward comforts, then has the Christian urgent need to look to his heart, and keep it with all diligence from replying against God or fainting under His hand. Job was a mirror of patience, yet his heart was discomposed by trouble. Jonah was a man of God, yet he was peevish under trial. When the food supplies gave out in the wilderness, they who had been miraculously delivered from Egypt, and who sang Jehovah's praises so heartily at the Red Sea, murmured and rebelled. It takes much grace to keep the heart calm amid the storms of life, to keep the spirit sweet when there is much to embitter the flesh, and to say, "The Lord gave, and the Lord taketh away; blessed be the name of the Lord." Yet this is a Christian duty! To help thereunto, first consider, fellow Christian, that despite these cross providences God is still faithfully carrying out the great design of electing love upon the souls of His people, and orders these very afflictions as means sanctified to that end. Nothing happens by chance, but all by Divine counsel (Eph. 1:11), and therefore it is that "all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose" (Rom. 8:28). Ah, beloved, it will wonderfully calm your troubled breast and sustain your fainting heart to rest upon that blessed fact. The poor worldling may say, "The bottom has dropped out of everything," but not so the saint, for the eternal God is his refuge, and underneath him are still the "everlasting arms." It is ignorance or forgetfulness of God's loving designs which makes us so prone to chafe under His providential dealings. If faith were more in exercise we should "count it all joy" when we fall into divers temptations, or trials (James 1:2). Why so? Because we should discern that those very trials were sent to wean our hearts from this empty world, to tear down pride and carnal security, to refine us. If, then, my Father has a design of love unto my soul, do I well to be angry with Him? Later, if not now, you will see that those bitter disappointments were blessings in disguise, and will exclaim, "It is good for me that I have been afflicted" (Ps. 119:7 1). "God is not the author of confusion" (1 Cor. 14:33); no, the Devil causes that, and he has succeeded in creating much in the thinking of many, by confounding the "heart" with the "nature." People say, "I was born with an evil heart, and I cannot help it." It would be more correct to say, "I was born with an evil nature, which I am responsible to subdue." The Christian needs clearly to recognize that in addition to his two "natures"—the

flesh and the spirit—he has a heart which God requires him to "keep." We have already touched upon this point, but deem it advisable to add a further word thereon. I cannot change or better my "nature," but I may and must my "heart." For example, "nature" is slothful and loves ease, but the Christian is to redeem the time and be zealous of good works. Nature hates the thought of death, but the Christian should bring his heart to desire to depart and be with Christ. The popular religion of the day is either a head or a hand one: that is to say, the laboring to acquire a larger and fuller intellectual group of the things of God or a constant round of activities called "service for the Lord." But the heart is neglected! Thousands are reading, studying, talking "Bible courses," but for all the spiritual benefits their souls derive they might as well be engaged in breaking stones. Lest it be thought that such a stricture is too severe, we quote a sentence from a letter recently received from one who has completed no less than eight of these "Bible study courses": "There was nothing in that 'hard work' which ever called for self-examination, which led me really to know God, and appropriate the Scriptures to my deep need." No, of course there was not: their compilers—like nearly all the speakers at the big "Bible conferences"—studiously avoid all that is unpalatable to the flesh, all that condemns the natural man, all that pierces and searches the conscience. Oh, the tragedy of this head "Christianity." Equally pitiable is the hand religion of the day, when young "converts" are put to teaching a Sunday school class, urged to "speak" in the open air, or take up "personal work." How many thousands of beardless youths and young girls are now engaged in what is called "winning souls for Christ," when their own souls are spiritually starved! They may "memorize" two or three verses of Scripture a day, but that does not mean their souls are being fed. How many are giving their evenings to helping in some "mission," when they need to be spending the time in "the secret of the Most High"! And how many bewildered souls are using the major part of the Lord's day in rushing from one meeting to another instead of seeking from God that which will fortify them against the temptations of the week! Oh, the tragedy of this hand "Christianity." How subtle the Devil is! Under the guise of promoting growth in "the knowledge of the Lord," he gets people to attend a ceaseless round of meetings, or to read an almost endless number of religious periodicals and books; or under the pretence of "honoring the Lord" by all this so-called "service" he induces the one or the other to neglect the great task which God has set before us: "keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life" (Prov. 4:23). Ah, it is far easier to speak to others than it is constantly to use and improve all holy means and duties to preserve the soul from sin, and maintain it in sweet and free communion with God. It is far easier to spend an hour reading a sensational article upon "the signs of the times" than it is to spend an hour in agonizing before God for purifying and rectifying grace! This work of keeping the heart is of supreme importance. The total disregard of it means that we are mere formalists. "My son, give Me thine heart" (Prov. 23:26): until that be done, God will accept nothing from us. The prayers and praises of our lips, the labour of our hands, yea, and a correct outward walk, are things of no value in His sight while the heart be estranged from Him. As the inspired apostle declared, "Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not love, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not love, I am nothing: And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not love, it profiteth nothing" (1 Cor. 13:1-3). If the heart be not right with God, we cannot worship Him, though we may go through the form of it. Watch diligently, then, your love for Him. God cannot be imposed upon, and he who takes no care to order his heart aright before Him is a hypocrite. "And they come unto thee as the people cometh, and they sit before thee as My people, and they hear thy words, but they will not do them; for with their mouth they show much love, but their heart goeth after their covetousness. And, lo, thou art unto them as a very lovely song of one that hath a pleasant voice, and can play well on an instrument" (Ezek. 33:31, 32). Here are a company of formal

hypocrites, as is evident from the words "as My people": like them, but not of them. And what constituted them impostors? Their outside was very fair—high professions, reverent postures, much seeming delight in the means of grace. Ah, but their hearts were not set on God, but were commanded by their lusts, went after covetousness. But lest a real Christian should infer from the above that He is a hypocrite too, because many times his heart wanders, and he finds—strive all he may—that he cannot keep his mind stayed upon God when praying, reading His Word, or engaged in public worship, to him we answer that the objection carries its own refutation. You say "strive all I may"; Ah, if you have, then the blessing of the upright is yours, even though God sees well to exercise you over the affliction of a wandering mind. There remains still much in the understanding and affections to humble you, but if you are exercised over them, strive against them, and sorrow over your very imperfect success, then that is quite enough to clear you of the charge of reigning hypocrisy. The keeping of the heart is supremely important because "out of it are the issues of life"; it is the source and fountain of all vital actions and operations. The heart is the warehouse, the hand and tongue are but the shops; what is in these comes from thence—the heart contrives and the members execute. It is in the heart that the principles of the spiritual life are formed: "A good man out of the good treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which is good; and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which is evil" (Luke 6:45). Then let us diligently see to it that the heart be well stored with pious instruction, seeking to increase in grateful love, reverential fear, hatred of sin, and benevolence in all its exercises, that from within these holy springs may flow and fructify our whole conduct and conversation. This work of keeping the heart is the hardest of all. "To shuffle over religious duties with a loose and heedless spirit will cost no great pains; but to set thyself before the Lord, and tie up thy loose and vain thoughts to a constant and serious attendance upon Him: this will cost something! To attain a facility and dexterity of language in prayer, and put thy meaning into apt and decent expressions, is easy; but to get thy heart broken for sin whilst thou art confessing it, be melted with free grace, whilst thou art blessing God for it, be really ashamed and humbled through the apprehensions of God's infinite holiness, and to keep thy heart in this frame, not only in, but after duty, will surely cost thee some groans and travailing pain of soul. To repress the outward acts of sin, and compose the external acts of thy life in a laudable and comely manner, is no great matter—even carnal persons by the force of common principles can do this; but to kill the root of corruption within, to set and keep up an holy government over thy thoughts, to have all things lie straight and orderly in the heart, this is not easy" (John Flavel). Ah, dear reader, it is far, far easier to speak in the open air than to uproot pride from your soul. It calls for much less toil to go out and distribute tracts than it does to cast out of your mind unholy thoughts. One can speak to the unsaved much more readily than he can deny self, take up his cross daily, and follow Christ in the path of obedience. And one can teach a class in the Sunday School with far less trouble than he can teach himself how to strengthen his own spiritual graces. To keep the heart with all diligence calls for frequent examination of its frames and dispositions, the observing of its attitude towards God, and the prevailing directions of its affections; and that is something which no empty professor can be brought to do! Give liberally to religious enterprises he may, but give himself unto the searching, purifying and keeping of his heart he will not. This work of keeping the heart is a constant one. "The keeping of the heart is such a work as is never done till life be done: this labour and our life end together. It is with a Christian in this business, as it is with seamen that have sprung a leak at sea; if they tug not constantly at the pump, the water increases upon them, and will quickly sink them. It is in vain for them to say the work is hard, and we are weary; there is no time or condition in the life of a Christian, which will suffer an intermission of this work. It is in the keeping watch over our hearts, as it was in the keeping up of Moses' hands, while Israel and Amalek were fighting below (Exodus 17:12); no sooner do Moses' hands grow heavy and sink down, but Amalek prevails. You know it cost David and Peter many a sad day and night for

intermitting the watch over their own hearts but a few minutes" (J. Flavel). Consequences of Heart Work Having sought to show that the keeping of the heart is the great work assigned the Christian, in which the very soul and life of true religion consists, and without the performance of which all other duties are unacceptable to God, let us now point out some of the corollaries and consequences which necessarily follow from this fact. 1. The labours which many have taken in religion are lost. Many great services have been performed, many wonderful works wrought by men, which have been utterly rejected by God, and shall receive no recognition in the day of rewards. Why? Because they took no pains to keep their hearts with God in those duties; this is the fatal rock upon which thousands of vain professors have wrecked to their eternal undoing—they were diligent about the externals of religion, but regardless of their hearts. How many hours have professors spent in hearing, reading, conferring and praying, and yet as to the supreme task God has assigned have done nothing. Tell me, vain professor, when did you spend five minutes in a serious effort to keep, purge, improve it? Think you that such an easy religion can save you? If so, we must inverse the words of Christ and say, "Wide is the gate and broad is the way that leadeth unto life, and many there be that go in thereat." 2. If the keeping of the heart be the great work of the Christian, then how few real Christians are there in the world. If everyone who has learned the dialect of Christianity and can talk like a Christian, if every one who has natural gifts and abilities and who is helped by the common assisting presence of the Spirit and pray and teach like a Christian, if all who associate themselves with the people of God, contribute of their means to His cause, take delight in public ordinances, and pass as Christians were real ones, then the number of the saints would be considerable. But, alas, to what a little flock do they shrink when measured by this rule: how few make conscience of keeping their hearts, watching their thoughts, judging their motives. Ah, there is no human applause to induce men to engage in this difficult work, and were hypocrites to do so they would quickly discover what they do not care to know. This heart work is left in the hands of a few hidden ones. Reader, are you one of them? 3. Unless real Christians spend more time and pains about their hearts than they have done, they are never likely to grow in grace, be of much use to God, or be possessors of much comfort in this world. You say, "But my heart seems so listless and dead." Do you wonder at it, when you keep it not in daily communion with Him who is the fountain of life? If your body had received no more concern and attention than your soul, what state would it now be in? Oh, my brother, or sister, has not your zeal run in the wrong channels? God may be enjoyed even in the midst of earthly employments: "Enoch walked with God, and begat sons and daughters" (Gen. 5:19)—he did not retire into a monastery, nor is there any need for you to do so. 4. It is high time the Christian reader set to this heart work in real earnest. Do not you lament, "They made me the keeper of the vineyards; but mine own vineyard have I not kept" (Song of Sol. 1:16)? Then away with fruitless controversies and idle questions; away with empty names and vain shows; away with harsh censuring of others—turn upon yourself. You have been a stranger long enough to this work; you have trifled about the borders of religion too long: the world has deterred you from this vitally necessary work too long. Will you now resolve to look better after your heart? Haste you to your closet.

Advantages of Heart Work The heart of man is his worst part before it be regenerate, and his best part afterwards; it is the seat of principles and the source of actions. The eye of God is, and the eye of the Christian ought to be, principally fixed upon it. The great difficulty after conversion is to keep the heart with God. Herein lies the very pinch and stress of religion; here is that which makes the way to life a narrow way, and the gate of heaven a straight one. To afford some direction and help in this great work, these articles have been presented. We realize their many defects, yet trust that God will be pleased to use them. No other subject can begin to compare with it in practical importance. The general neglect of the heart is the root cause of the present sad state of Christendom; the remainder of this article might readily be devoted unto the verifying and amplifying of that statement; instead, we merely point out briefly one or

two of the more prominent features. Why is it that so many preachers have withheld from their congregations that which was, so obviously, most needed? Why have they "spoken smooth things" instead of wielding the sword of the Spirit? Because their own hearts were not right with God: His holy fear was not upon them. An "honest and good heart" (Luke 8:15) will cause a servant of Christ to preach what he sees to be the most essential and profitable truths of the Word, however displeasing they may be unto many of his people. He will faithfully rebuke, exhort, admonish, correct and instruct, whether his hearers like it or not. Why have so many church members departed from the faith and given heed to seducing spirits? Why have multitudes been led away by the error of the wicked, turning the grace of God into lasciviousness? Why have so many others been attracted to companies of notional professors, which, despite their proud boasts of being the only people gathered together in (or unto) the name of Christ, are, for the most part, people who have only an acquaintance with the letter of Scripture and are strangers to practical godliness? Ah, the answer is not far to seek: it was because they had no heart acquaintance with the things of God. It is those who are sickly and diseased who fall easy victims unto the quacks; so it is those whose hearts are never rooted and grounded in the Truth who are tossed about with every wind and doctrine. The study and guarding of the heart is the best antidote against the infectious errors of the times. And this leads us to point out some of the advantages of keeping the heart. For much of what follows we are indebted to the Puritan, John Flavel. 1. The pondering and garrisoning of the heart is a great help to the understanding of the deep things of God. An honest and experienced heart is a wonderful aid to a weak head. Such a heart will serve as a commentary upon a great portion of the Scriptures. When such a one reads the Psalms of David or the Epistles of Paul, he will find there many of his own difficulties stated and solved: he will find them speaking the language of his own heart—recounting his experiences, expressing his sorrows and joys. By a close and regular study of the heart he will be far better fitted to understand the things of God than graceless rabbis and inexperienced doctors—not only will they be clearer, but far sweeter unto him. A man may discourse orthodoxly and profoundly of the nature and effects of faith, of the preciousness of Christ, and the sweetness of communion with God, who never felt the impressions or efficacy of them upon his own spirit. But how dull and dry will these notions be unto those who have experienced them. Ah, my reader, experience is the great schoolmaster. Much in Job and Lamentations will seem dull and uninteresting until you have had deeper exercises of soul. The seventh chapter of Romans is not likely to appeal much unto you until you make more conscience of indwelling sin. Many of the later Psalms will appear too extravagant in their language until you enjoy closer and sweeter fellowship with God. But the more you endeavour to keep your heart, and bring it into subjection unto God, to keep it from the evil solicitations of Satan, the more suited to your own case will you find many chapters of the Bible. It is not simply that you have to be in the "right mood" to appreciate, but that you have to pass through certain exercises of heart ere you can discover their appropriateness. Then it is that you will have "felt" and "tasted" for yourself the things of which the inspired writers treat. Then it is that you will have the key which unlocks many a verse that is fast closed unto masters of Hebrew and Greek. 2. Care in keeping the heart supplies one of the best evidences of sincerity. There is no external act which distinguishes the sound from the unsound professor, but before this trial no hypocrite can stand. It is true that when they think death to be very near many will cry out of the wickedness and fear in their hearts, but that signifies nothing more than does the howling of an animal when it is in distress. But if you are tender of your conscience, watchful of your thoughts, and careful each day of the workings and frames of your heart, this strongly argues the sincerity of it; for what but a real hatred of sin, what but a sense of the Divine eye being upon you, could put anyone upon these secret duties which lie out of the observation of all creatures? If, then, it be such a desirable thing to have a fair testimony of your integrity, and to know of a truth that you fear God, then study, watch, keep the heart. The true comfort of our souls much depends

upon this, for he that is negligent in keeping his heart is generally a stranger to spiritual assurance and the sweet comforts flowing from it. God does not usually indulge lazy souls with inward peace, for He will not be the patron of any carelessness. He has united together our diligence and comfort, and they are greatly mistaken who suppose that the beautiful child of assurance can be born without soul pangs. Diligent self-examination is called for: first the looking into the Word, and then the looking into our hearts, to see how far they correspond. It is true that the Holy Spirit indwells the Christian, but He cannot be discerned by I-us essence; it is His operations that manifest Him, and these are known by the graces he produces in the soul; and those can only be perceived by diligent search and honest scrutiny of the heart. It is in the heart that the Spirit works. 3. Care in keeping the heart makes blessed and fruitful the means of grace and the discharge of our spiritual duties. What precious communion we have with God when He is approached in a right frame of soul: then we may say with David, "My meditation of Him shall be sweet" (Ps. 104:34). But when the heart be indisposed, full of the things of this life, then we miss the comfort and joy which should be ours. The sermons you hear and the articles you read (if by God's servants) will appear very different if you bring a prepared heart to them! If the heart be right you will not grow drowsy while hearing or reading of the riches of God's grace, the glories of Christ, the beauty of holiness, or the needs-be for a scripturally ordered walk. It was because the heart was neglected that you got so little from attending to the means of grace! The same holds good of prayer. What a difference there is between a deeply exercised and spiritually burdened heart pouring out itself before God in fervent supplication and the utterance of verbal petitions by rote! It is the difference between reality and formality. He who is diligent in heart work and perceives the state of his own soul is at no loss in knowing what to ask God for. So he who makes it a practice of walking with God, communing with God, meditating upon God, spontaneously worships Him in spirit and in truth: like David, he will say, "My heart is inditing a good matter" (Ps. 45:1). The Hebrew there is very suggestive: literally it is "my heart is boiling up a good matter"; it is a figurative expression, taken from a living spring, which is bubbling up fresh water. The formalist has to rack his mind and, as it were, laboriously pump up something to say unto God; but he who makes conscience of heart work finds his soul like a bottle of new wine—ready to burst, giving vent to sorrow or joy as his case may be. 4. Diligence in keeping the heart will make the soul stable in the hour of temptation. The care or neglect of the conscience largely determines our attitude toward and response unto solicitations of evil. The careless heart falls an easy prey to Satan. His main attacks are made upon the heart, for if he gains that he gains all, for it commands the whole man! Alas, how easy a conquest is an unguarded heart; it is no more difficult for the Devil to capture it than for a burglar to enter a house whose windows and doors are unfastened. It is the watchful heart that both discovers and suppresses the temptation before it comes in its full strength. It is much like a large stone rolling down a hill—it is easy to stop at first, but very difficult after it has gained full momentum. So, if we cherish the first vain imagination as it enters the mind, it will soon grow into a powerful lust which will not take a nay. Acts are preceded by desires, and desires by thoughts. A sinful object first presents itself to the imagination, and unless that be nipped in the bud the affections will be stirred and enlisted. If the heart does not repel the evil imagination, if instead it dwells on it, encourages it, feeds on it, then it will not be long before the consent of the will is obtained. A very large and important part of heart work lies in observing its first motions, and checking sin there. The motions of sin are weakest at the first, and a little watchfulness and care then prevents much trouble and mischief later. But if the first movings of sin in the imagination be not observed and resisted, then the careless heart is quickly brought under the full power of temptation, and Satan is victorious. 5. The diligent keeping of the heart is a great aid to the improving of our graces. Grace never thrives in a careless soul, for the roots and habits of grace are planted in the heart, and the deeper they are radicated (cause to take root) there the more thriving and flourishing grace is. In Ephesians 3:17, we read of being "rooted and grounded in love":

love in the heart is the spring of every gracious word of the mouth and of every holy act of the hand. But is not Christ the "root" of the Christian's graces? Yes, the originating root, but grace is the derivative root, planted and nourished by Him, and according as this thrives under Divine influences, so the fruits of grace are more healthy and vigorous. But in a heart which is not kept diligently those fructifying influences are choked. Just as in an uncared-for garden the weeds crowd out the flowers, so vain thoughts that are not disallowed, and lusts which are not mortified, devour the strength of the heart. "My soul shall be satisfied as with marrow and with fatness; and my mouth shall praise Thee with joyful lips: when I remember Thee upon my bed, and meditate on Thee in the night watches" (Ps. 55:5, 6).

6. The diligent care of the heart makes Christian fellowship profitable and precious. Why is it that when Christians meet together there are often sad jarrings and contentions? It is because of unmortified passions. Why is their conversation so frothy and worthless? It is because of the vanity and earthiness of their hearts. It is not difficult to discern by the actions and converse of Christians what frames their spirits are under. Take one whose mind is truly stayed upon God; how serious, heavenly and edifying is his conversation: "The mouth of the righteous speaketh wisdom, and his tongue talketh of judgment: the law of his God is in his heart" (Ps. 37:30, 31). If each of us was humbled every day before God and under the evils of his own heart, we should be more pitiful and tender toward others (Gal. 6:1).

7. A heart well kept fits us for any condition God may cast us into, or any service He has to use us in. He who has learnt to keep his heart lowly is fit for prosperity; and he who knows how to apply Scripture promises and supports is fit to pass through any adversity. So he who can deny the pride and selfishness of his heart is fit to be employed in any service for God. Such a man was Paul; he not only ministered to others, but looked well to his own vineyard (see 1 Cor. 9:27). And what an eminent instrument he was for God: he knew how to abound and how to suffer loss. Let the people defy him, it moved him not, except to indignation; let them stone him, he could bear it.

8. By keeping our hearts diligently we should the soonest remove the scandals and stumbling-blocks out of the way of the world. How the worthy name of our Lord is blasphemed because of the wicked conduct of many who bear His name. What prejudice has been created against the Gospel by the inconsistent lives of those who preach it. But if we keep our hearts, we shall not add to the scandals caused by the ways of loose professors. Nay, those with whom we come in contact will see that we "have been with Jesus." When the majestic beams of holiness shine from a heavenly walk, the world will be awed and respect will again be commanded by the followers of the Lamb. Though the keeping of the heart entails such hard labour, do not such blessed gains supply a sufficient incentive to engage diligently in the same? Look over the eight special benefits we have named, and weigh them in a just balance; they are not trivial things. Then guard well your heart, and watch closely its love for God. Jacob served seven years for Rebekah, and they seemed unto him but a few days, for the love that he had unto her. The labour of love is always delightful. If God has your heart, the feet will run swiftly in the way of His commandments: duty will be a delight. Then let us earnestly pray, "So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom" (Ps. 90:12)—as we "apply" our hands unto manual tasks. Let me now close with a word or two of consolation to all serious Christians who have sought to give themselves faithfully and closely to this heart work, but who are groaning in secret over their apparent lack of success therein, and who are fearful that their experience falls short of a saving one. First, this argues that your heart is honest and upright. If you are mourning over heart conditions and sins, that is something no hypocrite does. Many a one is now in hell who had a better head than mine; many a one now in heaven complained of as bad a heart as thine. Second, God would never leave you under so many heart burdens and troubles if He intended not your benefit thereby. You say, Lord, why do I go mourning, all the day having sorrow of heart? For long have I been exercised over its hardness, and not yet it is broken. Many years have I been struggling against vain thoughts, and still I am plagued by them. When shall I get a better heart? Ah, God would thereby show

you what your heart by nature is, and have you take notice of how much you are beholden to free grace! So, too, He would keep you humble, and not let you fall in love with yourself! Third, God will shortly put a blessed end to these cares, watchings and heartaches. The time is coming when your heart shall be as you would have it, when you will be delivered from all fears and sorrows, and never again cry, "O my hard, vain, earthly, filthy heart." Then shall all darkness be purged from your understanding, all vanity from your affections, all guilt from your conscience, all perversity from your will. Then shall you be everlastingly, delightfully, ravishingly entertained and exercised upon the supreme goodness and infinite excellency of God. Soon shall break that morning without clouds, when all the shadows shall flee away; and then we "shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is" (1 John 3:2). Hallelujah!

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