

## Above All Else: Learning to Guard Your Heart

### *“Your life follows your heart”*

#### Part 1

**Intro:** The heart is a powerful thing. I’m not referring to our physical heart that keeps us alive. I’m referring to our emotional / spiritual / mental components that literally drives the direction of our lives.

- I always told my daughters to be careful who they gave their hearts to. WHY? Once a girl gives her heart away, changing directions is literally impossible. People may say things such as; “How can she marry a guy like that?” Easy answer: She gave her heart away.
- Once you give your heart away to something – a person / a career / a desire / money / bitterness / your life will follow the direction of your heart. This is why telling someone to “just follow your heart”, is not always the best advice. Often, we have given our hearts away to the wrong thing. If that’s the case, following your heart is foolish.
- The writers of the bible knew how influential the heart was. This is why the writer of Proverbs penned these words.

*Prov. 4:23 “Guard your heart above all else, for it determines the course of your life.” (NLT)*

When the Jewish writers talked about the heart, their understanding was very different then our modern way we describe the heart. Usually we associate the heart with feelings and emotions. Jewish writers had a more comprehensive perspective.

*“The heart is the seat of the emotional and intellectual life. The three special functions, knowing, feeling, and willing...were attributed to the heart by the Biblical writers. (Jewish Encyclopedia – 1906)*

- In other words, when the writers of the bible referenced the heart, they had in mind that the heart controls our thinking – our feelings – and our doing...our actions.  
Comprehensive!
- You can see why guarding the heart above all else is so important. If we do not guard our thinking, our emotions and our actions, we can destroy our lives.
- It is easy to see why the writer of Proverbs concludes that the heart determines the course of our life. Our thinking, our emotions and our actions will determine our life outcome. Therefore, it is imperative we learn to guard these areas of our lives.
- Today we are going to lay down some general principals about this and then for the following three weeks we are going to explore how to guard each one of these areas and give very practical ways how we can do this.
- First, let’s talk about the importance of our choices.

### **1. Our lives are the sum total of our choices**

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- I do not mean to sound harsh in saying this but the reality is our choices form our lives. Each of us have the life we have chosen. Even events that have been beyond our control (sickness / crisis / pain / being wronged by others) have not been the greatest influencers of our lives...but rather, it has been the choices we have made in response to these things.
- Our choices have a greater impact on the direction of our lives than the circumstances we encounter. We can blame the brokenness and unfairness of this world for our life but at the end of the day, we choose how to respond.
- When I was voted out of my church over 20 years ago I could have chosen to get mad at God and people or I could choose to let that pain drive me deeper into my relationship with Jesus. Choice!

*Gal. 6:7-9 “Don’t be misled—you cannot mock the justice of God. You will always harvest what you plant. <sup>8</sup> Those who live only to satisfy their own sinful nature will harvest decay and death from that sinful nature. But those who live to please the Spirit will harvest everlasting life from the Spirit. <sup>9</sup> So let’s not get tired of doing what is good. At just the right time we will reap a harvest of blessing if we don’t give up.” (NLT)*

- Everything about this passage has to do with choice. We can choose to plant good seed or bad seed into our lives. We will reap / or harvest the results of our choices. It is not the circumstances that determine our live it is our choices.
- The reason we get tired of doing good is the right choices are hard when life and circumstances are contrary. But the reality from God’s word is simply this: Some choices breathe life into us and some bring death. We must choose wisely
- Indianan Jones movie clip: Explain the scene - He chose poorly.
- For example: When someone has wronged you and you can either choose to become bitter and unforgiving or you make the choice to forgive. One choice breathes life into you while the other brings death.
- Making the choices to guard your heart is one of the most life breathing decisions you can make. If you want your life to change you must stop wishing the circumstances change. Instead, it is time for you to choose a different direction. It is time for you to make a choice. It is time to choose wisely!

## **2. We must be discerning what we allow in to our lives**

- We all have choices what we allow into our lives...into our hearts / into our minds. It is imperative to learn to be selective and know the difference between what is good and what is unhealthy.

*Prov. 25:28 “A person without self-control is like a city with broken-down walls.”*

- Cities had walls and gates for a reason in ancient times. Walls were for the protection of the city to keep the bad influences out. The gates were there to allow the good to come in. We must develop walls and gates for our lives. We simply cannot allow everything in. We must be discerning.

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- Developing self-control is learning to say no to some things and yes to the right things. Too many people's lives are like a city with broken down walls. Everything is allowed in.
- Not everything influences our minds / our emotions / and our actions for good. Unless we are intentional at limiting exposure to these negative influencers, our heart will be influenced and ultimately follow suit.
- How do we develop gates and walls? Just to clarify, walls are there for our protection. Walls are when we say NO to certain unhealthy influences. Gates are for the good things we choose to allow in for our benefit.
  - Let the word of God influence your decisions  
Trying to discern what to keep out and what to allow in will be easier if you are reading God's word on a regular basis. Ask God to lead you and give you discernment. Trust that the Holy Spirit will lead you in this. This is His role in your life. He will take the word of God and then show you how to apply it to your unique situation.
  - Resist becoming legalistic  
Be careful that you do not create a list of "bad things" that you now avoid and develop a self-righteous spirit inside you. How do you know? You become critical of others who do not share the same conviction as you. (More about this in a few minutes.) Don't judge people who have different walls and gates than you.
  - This is a process not an event  
You can't build walls and gates around a city overnight. You can't build it quickly around your heart either. This is a process where you are learning to listen to God speak to you. He is telling you how to build it. He is leading you where to build a wall and where to place a gate. He still shows me new things that He tells me to stay away from...or allow in.

### **3. We must guard ourselves from being self-righteous towards others**

- Just because God has told you to protect your heart from something, don't judge other people who do not have the same convictions. When we start guarding our hearts it is easy to start judging others who appear to not be guarding theirs.

*James 4:11 "Don't speak evil against each other, dear brothers and sisters. If you criticize and judge each other, then you are criticizing and judging God's law. But your job is to obey the law, not to judge whether it applies to you." (NLT)*

- Judging others is one of the quickest signs of spiritual immaturity. When you project your convictions on to others, you tip your hand to your spiritual maturity level.

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- God may tell us to guard our hearts differently. We all have areas of weakness that are unique to each of us. You may have the freedom to do certain things that Jesus tells me to guard myself from. Some things I may have freedom to do God has not given you that freedom.
- One of the issue that faced the early church was eating food that was sacrificed to idols. This was a big deal in the church. Let me explain the context of what was taking place 2000 years ago in the church. This was such a big deal, the Apostle Paul wrote an entire chapter about it in I Cor. Paul even addresses it again in the book of Romans.

I Cor. 8 and food sacrificed to idols – Explain this issue in the early church. We must understand the idolatry of the culture. Idolatry was big business – idol makers / temples / people were saturated with this. (Talk about being in Athens last year)

Now, people were giving their lives to Jesus and coming out of this culture of idolatry. When you went to Safeway to buy some meat, the odds are it came from one of the temples as a sacrifice to a god. This bothered some believers in Jesus while others couldn't care less. See the problem?

*Rom. 14:14-16 "I know and am convinced on the authority of the Lord Jesus that no food, in and of itself, is wrong to eat. But if someone believes it is wrong, then for that person it is wrong. <sup>15</sup> And if another believer is distressed by what you eat, you are not acting in love if you eat it. Don't let your eating ruin someone for whom Christ died. <sup>16</sup> Then you will not be criticized for doing something you believe is good." (NLT)*

- Don't force your convictions on to other people

This is something I certainly wish the followers of Jesus would get better at. For example: Just because the Lord has told you to not drink, doesn't mean you have the right to force others to have the same conviction. The bible does not condemn drinking. Yet, there are many factors why many people should not participate in it.

Explain –

- Don't force your gate or wall on other people. Sometimes we force our gates on other people who need to have a wall. That's not loving!
  - Since we do not know the weaknesses and history of others, we must be careful and gracious.
- Don't think your convictions make you spiritually / morally superior  
Just because Jesus has told you to stay away from a particular issue does not make you morally or spiritually better than anyone else. This is a fleshly self-righteousness that has no place in God's Kingdom. This attitude is a blemish on the church. I see believers beating each other up over meaningless issues rather than following Jesus.
    - What day of the week to worship

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- Drinking alcoholic beverages
  - What books and movies to see – The Shack
  - Secular concerts
- Be willing to lay aside your rights for the sake of loving others  
 Just because you have a right to do something does not make it right if it damages another person. I may have a gate in a specific area of my life but now I am visiting another city...another person and their gates and walls are different than mine. Therefore, for the sake of love, I lay aside my rights in order to walk in love.
    - If there is a wall with alcohol, I respect that conviction
    - If there is a wall with social media
    - If there is a wall with particular music
    - If there is a wall with locations – eating in the bar area of a restaurant.
 Our relationships with one another are much more important than exercising my freedom to do something. The only reason you have issues with laying aside your rights for the sake of others is that you are selfish and lack love for your brother or sister in Christ.

As we learn to guard our hearts in these next few weeks we must be cautious and not allow a self-righteous spirit to develop in us. Our job is to walk in love. As we all learn how to guard our hearts better, may our lives be defined by how we love one another.

- Do you need to be a bit more discerning about what you are allowing in your life? Is it time to be thinking about building better walls and gates on your life?
- Do you struggle with a self-righteous, critical spirit towards others who have different walls and gates than you? Is your life defined more by the walls you have created to keep whatever evil out; your freedoms you like to celebrate...or is it defined more by your love for others?