

Keeping the Heart

*“Keep thy heart
with all diligence;
for out of it are the
issues of life.”*

—Proverbs 4:23

IT SEEMS A THING INCRED-

ible that one, having once been enlightened and come into the fellowship of the Lord's family, could ever allow

God's Word of Truth to slip away from them. However, we sadly face the fact that it has happened, and does, from time to time. Someone may say, “Well, this surely cannot happen to us,” and we trust and pray that it will not happen to any of us. The point is, unless we are constantly on our guard, this could indeed happen to any of the Lord's people.

As we look back to the earlier days of the harvest period of the Gospel Age, to the many brethren who helped spread the glorious message of the Scriptures, almost unbelievably, a good number of them lost that very understanding before they died. What was the reason? Was it because they were deceived by the Adversary? Was it the attractions of the world that overwhelmed them? Was it the weakness of the flesh? Were they not as spiritually minded as the Lord's people of today? Surely the word of the Lord we hear spoken today is no more spiritual than that which was spoken during the earlier part of the harvest. Whatever the details

may have been in each individual case, failure along the lines of one's heart condition likely played a key role in the departure of some from the faith. This should be a warning to us. "Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall."—I Cor. 10:12

THE HEART—OUR RESPONSIBILITY

The Lord has promised many things to us: protection from the Adversary; wisdom and enlightenment from above; sufficiency in all things to make our calling and election sure; daily experiences that are best suited for our spiritual development. We are assured that if God is for us, no one can prevail against us, and he has promised that he will never leave us, nor forsake us. (Rom. 8:31; Heb. 13:5) However, there is one thing that the Lord will not do for us, and that is the matter of keeping the heart. This we must do ourselves, as noted in our opening text.

We can illustrate the point in this way. Many people have a small garden in one corner of their backyard where they enjoy working the soil and watching the various kinds of vegetables grow and develop until they reach maturity and fruition. There are three elements that are essential for a healthy garden: water, sunlight, and soil. The sunlight and rain are provided by God—we have no control over these. The soil, though, is our responsibility. We must see to it that it is cultivated regularly and supplied with the organic matter and nutrients necessary for the health of each plant.

Similarly, the Lord has provided, so to speak, the sunshine and rain necessary for our spiritual growth,

but he has appointed us the job of preparing the soil of our heart. Unless we prepare our hearts properly and cultivate and care for it regularly, this new life in Christ will not be healthy and will not grow properly. In the garden at home, we also find it necessary to pull the weeds out every once in a while, and when we think we have gotten them all, in a few days we find others have appeared and must also be pulled.

This means we must examine our hearts regularly and see to it that we do not allow any of these weeds to grow—impure thoughts, wrong motives, the little beginnings of pride and selfishness; for if we do not get rid of them quickly, they can cause us much trouble. If not dealt with, they are very apt to soon choke out the New Creature. (II Cor. 5:17) The New Creature is rooted in the soil of our heart, and the lifeblood of this newly begotten being is circulated and controlled by the heart condition.

KEY TO THE NEW CREATURE

Why did the Lord use the symbol of the heart in this way? Just as the fleshly heart is the central source of the life-flow through our natural bodies, so our newly consecrated heart is the mainspring of our life as a New Creature. Our heart attitude toward God, Jesus, the Word of Truth, and our fellow brethren will determine the growth of our new life in Christ.

When we made a consecration to God we were very sincere—we held back nothing. It was a complete consecration. Otherwise the Heavenly Father would never have accepted it. If, however, we begin to draw back from the fulfillment of our vow of

consecration, and if our consecrated attitude begins to change, it would be a serious detriment to the New Creature, which depends upon a proper heart condition to maintain its spiritual health and growth.

We note in our opening verse that out of the heart are “the issues of life.” Through the words of Solomon, the Lord is here telling us that life itself is going to be dependent upon the condition of our heart. Whether we will be found worthy to attain unto the future reward of life everlasting is fully—not partly—dependent upon whether we are now, in this present life, keeping our hearts with all diligence.

SCRIPTURAL ADMONITIONS

The Lord considers this matter of keeping the heart so important that he has given us many admonitions in the Bible to help us understand what is required of us to keep our hearts properly. We find mentioned in the Scriptures particular attributes, or elements, of a sanctified heart. It is critical that we have them continually before our minds.

Meekness and humility are two of these elements. “Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls.” (Matt. 11:29) Humility and meekness are very important as foundations of a proper heart condition. Jesus, our perfect example along this line, indicates in this verse that if we become yoked with him, and learn from him, we will become like him in meekness and humility of heart. Doing so we will find peace and rest for our souls.

Sitting at the feet of Jesus is another way we develop a meek and humble attitude. We sit at his feet every time we come together for fellowship

and study. Jesus said he would be there with us on these occasions. (Heb. 10:25; Matt. 18:20) He does this through the spirit of Truth emanating from each consecrated heart present. If we humble ourselves, we will find it possible to learn valuable lessons from every member of the body, even those who may appear to be the weakest saints among us. Let us see to it that humility and meekness are truly a part of our heart condition.

“Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding.” (Prov. 3:5) Trust with all our heart, this verse tells us. We would not get very far if trust and confidence in the Lord were not a part of our heart condition. It is easy to trust in the written Word of God in the quietness of study and meditation. How often, though, we lean on our own understanding in meeting the trials and experiences of our daily lives and fail to apply the things we have learned from his Word. Let us learn, rather, to seek his will and guidance in all things pertaining to our daily lives, and then to follow it in our decisions, words, and actions. If we have this trustful attitude of heart, coupled with submissiveness to his leading, we will be richly blessed through the providential overruling of our Heavenly Father.

Obedience is another important heart attitude. “Blessed are they that keep his testimonies, and that seek him with the whole heart.” (Ps. 119:2) Obedience is a universal law of God, and none will ever have life everlasting without learning this fundamental principle. For the child of God, this means a conscientious doing of the Lord’s will daily, and a sincere application of the principles of truth and righteousness in our lives. As the psalmist

declared, this is not something we can do halfheartedly, but we must give wholehearted obedience to the Lord. We must obey, not out of compulsion, but because our heart delights to do the Father's will.—Ps. 40:8

THE PEACE OF GOD

Another heart element is peace. "Let the peace of God rule in your hearts." (Col. 3:15) Jesus said, "My peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid." (John 14:27) The peace of God and of Christ is wonderful. However, we can lose that peace simply by fraternizing with the world and appropriating to ourselves some of the cares, ambitions, and fears, that are so much a part of this present order of things. Let us be sure that we are not allowing anything in this life to interfere with the peace of God ruling in our heart.

Next we come to patience. "Be ye also patient; stablish your hearts: for the coming of the Lord draweth nigh." (James 5:8) We are not always as patient as we would like to be, but it must become a part of our heart condition. We must learn to "wait patiently" upon the Lord in all things.—Ps. 37:7

A very important element of our heart is love. "Thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might." (Deut. 6:5) Nothing else would matter much if love was not the crowning attribute of our heart condition. "Love the LORD thy God with all thine heart"—that is, with a wholehearted, unreserved love. Nothing short of that is acceptable to God. We love God "because he first loved us." (I John 4:19) We

increase our love for him by learning more about him through the study of his Word, thus being drawn into a closer fellowship with him.

True love then is in proportion to knowledge and understanding. We love God because we know something about his wonderful character and plan. He has revealed himself to us in order that we can love him, for he wants our love and adoration. That love is increased as we seek to increase our understanding of his Word and his will for us. Our love for the brethren likewise increases as we come to know more about them—their faithfulness, their spirituality, their example. We love them accordingly, just as our Lord loved his disciples more and more as he saw their dedication and devotion to the Messianic cause grow and develop over time. So then, through fellowship together we learn to love one another more.

SEEKING GOD

In Jeremiah 29:13, seeking the Lord is identified as a desired heart element. “Ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart.” It was because of our heart condition that the Lord revealed himself to us in the first place, and we consecrated our lives to him, but this must continue to be our attitude. We must daily seek the Lord’s guidance and overruling in all our affairs of life. If we do, the hand of the Lord will be revealed to us, and we will learn the lessons and benefit by the experiences he gives us. Let us continue daily to search for the will of the Lord with all our heart.

Certainly our heart condition would not be complete without faith. “Let us draw near with a true

heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience.” (Heb. 10:22) We also know that “without faith it is impossible to please him [God].” (Heb. 11:6) The apostle suggests that a true heart is one having a “full assurance of faith.” We sometimes define faith as a conviction or belief, but this is not sufficient. A real faith is one in which a conviction or belief is evidenced by works. “Faith without works is dead.” (James 2:26) It would seem then that the Lord does not gauge our faith on the basis of how much knowledge and understanding we have, but rather by the way that knowledge is proven and given expression in our daily conduct. Let us, therefore, show our faith to the Lord and to one another through our good works, and seek to have his will fulfilled in our lives continually.

LOVE WITH A PURE HEART

We are to have the heart characteristic of love for the brethren. “See that ye love one another with a pure heart fervently.” (I Pet. 1:22) Loving the brethren is one of the unmistakable evidences that we are in the family of Christ. Notice that the Apostle Peter indicates that this love should not be just a passive one, but a fervent love. The Apostle John wrote: “We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren.” (I John 3:14) If we ever lose the desire to have fellowship with the fellow body members of Christ, we would have reason to fear that something has gone seriously wrong in our heart.

It is important that we consider Paul’s multifaceted definition of true brotherly love: “Love

suffereth long, and is kind; love envieth not; love vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not its own, is not provoked, taketh not account of evil; rejoiceth not in unrighteousness, but rejoiceth with the truth; beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.” (I Cor. 13:4-7, *Revised Version*) Let us measure our own hearts by these standards, and if we always have this kind of all-encompassing love toward our brethren, our fellowship together will indeed be sweet.

MAKING MELODY IN OUR HEART

Finally, we note Ephesians 5:19, in which we learn that our heart must always be in a rejoicing and prayerful attitude: “Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord.” If the Truth has entered deeply into our hearts, it will bring immeasurable joy to us. All true Christians should find this to be the case as they look upon their lives. This attitude of prayer and communion with our Heavenly Father is the condition in which our heart should find itself. However, “singing and making melody” in our heart to the Lord is not always easy. Our Heavenly Father gives us experiences from time to time designed to test us along this line.

Have we ever found ourselves murmuring and complaining when things go wrong, or when they seem to work out differently than we had planned? Have we ever chafed under trials and unpleasant circumstances? Let us each take stock of our own hearts, and perhaps we will see that there is

something more yet to be done along this line. It is not easy to “glory in tribulations,” but this is the standard we must reach.—Rom. 5:3

Let us call to mind the occasion when Paul and Silas were in prison. “When they had laid many stripes upon them, they cast them into prison, charging the jailor to keep them safely: ... And at midnight Paul and Silas prayed, and sang praises unto God.” (Acts 16:23-25) We must give careful attention to our own hearts along this line.

ENLARGING OUR HEART

As we have discussed these elements of a sanctified heart, we trust that all the Lord’s dear people have made progress along these lines. However, after carefully examining ourselves and taking stock of our heart condition, we may feel the need to continue to have these heart elements “enlarged.” This thought is suggested in II Corinthians 6:11,13. “O ye Corinthians, our mouth is open unto you, our heart is enlarged. ... Now for a recompence in the same, (I speak as unto my children,) be ye also enlarged.” The enlarging of one’s heart is vital to the spiritual growth of the Christian. With the natural body, the heart of a baby is enlarged as the child grows toward maturity in order to take care of the needs of a growing body. Thus it is also with the New Creature. Our sanctified heart must be enlarged in proportion as we grow toward spiritual maturity.

If we plant a seed in a container with just a little bit of soil it will sprout and begin to grow, but as it gets larger we must put it in a larger container with more soil. Otherwise it will become sickly and

perhaps even die. When we dedicated our life to the Lord, the soil of our heart was sufficiently prepared so that this new spiritual life could take root and have its beginning. However, unless we are enlarging these heart elements the New Creature will not properly grow and develop toward maturity. Let us recall our theme text once again: “Keep thy heart with all diligence, for out of it are the issues of life.” Our very life in Christ is dependent upon how we keep our heart.

Another important thought is this: The Lord tries our hearts from time to time. “The refining pot is for silver and the furnace for gold, But the LORD tests the hearts.” (Prov. 17:3, *New King James Version*) Does God test our heart so he can determine what condition it is in? We think not. He could simply read the heart and know its present condition. The Heavenly Father gives us these experiences—he “tests the hearts”—in order that we ourselves might see some of our weaknesses and imperfections. Through trying experiences, he indicates to us those areas of our heart condition which need special attention. Then it is up to us to benefit from these lessons and have them serve as stepping-stones in this work of having our hearts enlarged.

OUR HEART TO BE JUDGED

We believe that in the final analysis, at the end of life’s course, our Heavenly Father will judge in the case of each one of his people as to their worthiness or unworthiness to share with our Lord Jesus in the glory of the divine plane. We suggest that he will make this a judgment of our heart, plus the expression of our heart sentiments through good

works. This thought is expressed by John the Revelator: “All the churches shall know that I am he which searcheth the reins and hearts: and I will give unto every one of you according to your works.”—Rev. 2:23

God is giving us all the tools and experiences necessary so that we can take good care of our hearts. We must be careful, however, not to use our pruning shears on our brother or sister in Christ, or perhaps attempt to pull a weed or two out of another’s heart that we think we see there. We have all we can do to prepare our own hearts, and as we seek to do this, our brethren will notice this work progressing in our lives, and they will be encouraged to do likewise. We are examples one to another in this way. May this work of “enlarging” and developing our heart continue in our individual lives, for the Lord has promised to pour out his rich blessings upon all those who are keeping their “heart with all diligence.” ■