

KEEP YOUR HEART

KEEPING THE HEART 1

The heart is the heart of the matter in the life of faith.



T. M. MOORE

A REVISION STUDY FROM
THE FELLOWSHIP OF AILBE

Keep Your Heart
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Keep Your Heart

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Welcome to *Keep Your Heart*

In Biblical teaching, the *heart* refers to that faculty of the soul which manages our affections. The heart works together with the mind and the conscience, in a relationship of mutual interaction, overlap, and cooperation, to bring forth in us the words and deeds that make us who we are.

Of the three components of the soul, Scripture puts greatest emphasis on the heart. What we love, delight in, seek, and desire will determine how we think and what our values and priorities are. We need to understand the heart, and the various affections it harbors, so that we might grow in the mind of Christ and seek His Kingdom as our highest priority in all things.

Keep Your Heart is the first of a multi-part study on the heart, the affections, and how we can exercise diligence in making sure what issues from our hearts is what the Lord by His Spirit intends.

ReVision studies are designed as brief introductions to the subject under consideration. We hope they will enlarge your worldview, help you to become more firmly rooted in Scripture, equip you to minister to others, and stimulate you to want to learn more about the Word of God and the Biblical worldview.

We're happy to provide this study at no charge. If you find these studies helpful, we hope you'll consider sending a gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, to help us in making these resources available to others.

May the Lord bless your study of His Word.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 The Essence of True Faith

*Keep your heart with all diligence,
For out of it spring the issues of life.* Proverbs 4.23

How can we know?

What is the essence of true Christian faith? That is, how can someone know when he is in possession of the kind of faith that issues in salvation, now and forever more?

Many answers have been proffered for this question. Some insist that holding right doctrine is the essence of true faith. Many claim that nothing more than sincerely believing is the fundamental requirement. Others argue that some extraordinary manifestation of the Spirit is the real hallmark of saving faith. Still others want to insist that belonging to the right church or denomination is all that matters.

With so many different voices making their case for the essence of true faith, how shall we decide between them?

The heart of the matter

By turning to Scripture, of course. Solomon advised his son to “keep” his heart “with all diligence, for out of it *spring* the issues of life.” All the great issues and concerns of our temporal and eternal existence are determined within us, in our hearts, in the depths of our souls. It is here, in our hearts, where we may discover whether we possess true and saving faith.

To this the Lord Jesus Christ agrees. He has indicated this in many ways, by commanding us to love God with *all our heart* (Matt. 22.37); by teaching that the heart determines *what we will treasure* the most (Matt. 6.21); by noting that whatever is in the heart *commands the words of our mouths* (Matt. 12.34); and by promising that the blessing of God comes to those who are *pure in heart* (Matt. 5.8).

The heart, it seems, is the heart of the matter when it comes to every aspect of life, including whether we truly believe in Jesus Christ for salvation. We need to understand the heart, and the affections it harbors, and to make sure that our hearts are in line with the teaching of Scripture and that we know how to *keep* or *guard* our hearts with the kind of diligence necessary to ensure that what *springs* from our lives will be from the living waters of God’s Spirit (Jn. 7.37-39).

Religious Affections

To help us in this study we turn to one of the great soul physicians of Church history, Jonathan Edwards. In his book, *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*, published in 1746, the great Puritan preacher and theologian leads us on a valuable *tour de force* of the heart and its role in the life of faith.

Edwards insists, “True religion, in great part, consists in holy affections.” By this he means that we may have assurance that the faith we possess is true and saving when our hearts are rightly formed with respect to God and His will, when what we *desire* and *love*, and what we find to be our source of greatest *satisfaction, delight, and fulfillment* are just what God commends in His Word.

Edwards understood the soul as being comprised of two primary faculties. First is what he referred to as “perception.” This encompasses all the activities of what we think of as the mind. As we shall see, the mind is in continuous communication with the heart and has a powerful influence on the kinds of affections – holy or profane – that characterize us.

The other faculty is what Edwards called “inclination.” Here he refers to what the Scriptures mean by the

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term, “heart.” The heart affects the ways we are bent in our souls, what we incline to, long for, seek after, desire, and, as a result, serve.

Heart and mind work together – with the conscience or will – to shape the soul. In Edwards’ view, the heart is most important in making us the kind of people we are, and in determining the nature of our faith, whether it be true and sincere or shallow, false, and misleading. We want to look more carefully at what he has to say concerning how to “keep” our hearts with all vigilance.

For reflection:

1. What do you understand by “the heart”? How does the heart affect the way we live?
2. *Affections* can also be thought of as *feelings*. What do you consider to be the most important feelings for living a full and abundant Christian life?
3. Do you think it’s possible for people to change or improve their affections? Explain.

Next steps – Conversation: What does it mean to keep watch over your heart? What will you do today to begin making this a more consistent part of your walk with the Lord?

2 Heart of It All

But the LORD said to Samuel, “Do not look at his appearance or at his physical stature, because I have refused him. For the LORD does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.” 1 Samuel 16.7

Looking on our hearts

The heart is the place to look to determine the state or condition of one’s faith –whether it be true or false, lively or feeble. The Lord Himself looks on the heart, to see what’s brewing there, to observe the *bent* or *inclination* of a person’s soul, what a person loves and desires, and to respond in ways appropriate to what He sees there – whether to *reject* the person, as He did with King Saul, or to *receive* and *bless* him, as He did with David.

The Lord is looking on our hearts, and, so, we should be looking on them as well, keeping good watch on our affections and guarding against anything that might corrupt our hearts and compromise our faith. The renewing of our heart depends on understanding the role of the heart in the soul, and of improving the right use of affections, in line with the teaching of God’s Word.

Jonathan Edwards wrote, “true religion consists, in a great measure, in vigorous and lively actings of the *inclination* and *will* of the soul, or the fervent exercises of the *heart*...” He elaborated this theme of his great work, *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* by writing, “That religion which God requires, and will accept, does not consist in weak, dull, and lifeless wishes, raising us but a little above a state of indifference. God, in his word, greatly insists upon it, that we be in good earnest, *fervent in spirit*, and our hearts vigorously engaged in religion.”

Affections

When we hear the word *affection* we might think of a feeling of fondness for another person. We say that we have affection for our spouses, children, and friends, and we associate that feeling with a kind of pleasantness, warmth, and wellbeing.

But Edwards means much more than this. For him, the word *affections* includes every emotion, attitude, or sentiment which stirs from the depths of our souls and inclines us to act in particular ways and, thus, to be a particular kind of person. As he puts it, “The affections are no other, than the more vigorous and *sensible exercise of the inclination and will* of the soul.”

Don’t miss the key parts of that definition. First, affections are *vigorous*. That is, they have strength. They exert formative power. They can “affect” us, if you will, in many ways. They are the very “springs of motion” which vigorously exert themselves on every aspect of our lives.

Second, affections are *sensible*. That is, not only do we *feel them deeply*, but they *come to expression* in *sensible* ways, that is, in ways that engage our senses and bodies in action, or “motion”, as Edwards puts it. Affections are not content merely to remain *feelings* in our hearts. The *true* nature of our affections – regardless of what we might insist we may *feel* – will be observed in the actions to which they move us. We may *feel* very loving toward someone, but if our *actions* do not demonstrate that love, then the true affection governing our hearts is something *other* than love, such as *indifference* or even *hatred*.

Finally, note that affections tend to create a condition in the soul, an “inclination and will” of the soul, so that whatever we harbor in our hearts bends or inclines us to act in consistent ways, according to the set of affections in our heart. The affections, in other words, shape the nature of our very *character*. Affections, it is thus clear, are the heart of it all when it comes to understanding the content of our souls and the character of

our faith.

A powerful thing

Edwards insists, “If we be not in good earnest in religion, and our wills and inclinations be not strongly exercised, we are nothing. The things of religion are so great, that there can be no suitableness in the exercises of our hearts, to their nature and importance, unless they be lively and powerful.” He continues, “True religion is evermore a powerful thing; and the power of it appears, in the first place, in its exercises in the heart, its principal and original seat.”

Thus, it should not be difficult to determine the condition of our faith at any given time. All we need to do is examine the ways our hearts are *vigorously* inclined, what kind of *feror* for God and His will we evidence, and how these affections have shaped the *kind of people* we are.

And if what we find, upon examination, is not consistent with what the Scriptures teach, then we must apply more diligence to *keeping* our hearts, and to improving them in line with the heart of God and His Word.

For reflection

1. Give some examples of how affections move us to action.
2. Why is it important to know that how we *feel* may not actually describe the true state of the affections of our heart? What makes affections true?
3. Because affections are so powerful in shaping who we are and how we act, we need to make sure we understand as much as possible about the heart and its operations. Explain.

Next steps – Preparation: In what kinds of ways – to what things and actions – is your heart “vigorously inclined”? What do you most desire? Long for? Think about with delight? This week, invite some other Christian friends to consider these questions with you. What do your answers reveal about the condition of your own heart?

3 Two Kinds of Affections

“A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good; and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart brings forth evil. For out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.” Luke 6.45

The fruit of the heart

The heart is that sector or faculty of our immaterial spirits in which affections are generated and harbored. Together with the mind and the conscience, it comprises the spiritual center of our lives, the soul. The heart is the seat of affections. Affections are the sentiments, feelings, attitudes, and so forth that characterize and move us, what Jonathan Edwards called the “more vigorous and sensible exercises of the inclination and will of the soul.” Affections are the fruit of the heart, and the heart is the heart of it all when it comes to determining the condition of our faith in God.

Edwards is most helpful in analyzing the nature of the affections. He explains that “the affections are of two sorts; they are those by which the soul is carried out to what is in view, cleaving *to* it, or *seeking* it; or those by which it is averse *from* it, and *opposes* it.” He continues, “Of the former sort are *love, desire, hope, joy, gratitude, complacency*. Of the latter kind are *hatred, fear, anger, grief*, and such like...”

Thus, we might say, our hearts generate and harbor affections which *incline us* toward certain people, things, situations, and so forth, as well as affections which *cause us to draw back* from or *to avoid* these same.

Valid and useful

Both kinds of affections are valid and useful. It’s not that we want our lives to be characterized only by what we might construe as the *positive* affections – love, joy, gratitude and so forth – while we work hard not to harbor within us any of what we might regard as the *negative* attitudes – hate, anger, grief, and the like. Edwards insists, and he is correct, that *both kinds of affections* exist in us, are valid, and are intended to shape us in the direction of holiness.

The key is to understand the different kinds of affections, to make sure they are properly focused and intensified, and to keep watch over our hearts so that their condition continues as God, Who looks on our hearts, intends.

Let’s explore this a bit further. We might conclude, by reading a passage such as Luke 6.45, that the goal of keeping our hearts with all vigilance, is to nurture and expand *positive* affections and to suppress or eradicate *negative* affections. That is, we want only love, peace, and joy in our souls, and none of that anger, hatred, or sorrow.

But this would be a wrong conclusion. What really matters, and what determines the kind of person we are, and the *vigor* and *health* of our faith, are three things: Are *all the affections* God has placed in our souls functioning? Are they *focused* on the proper objects? And are we nurturing them to greater *vigor and intensity* as we should?

Love

An example can help us at this point. Let’s take the affection of love. Love is that affection which most *inclines us toward* someone or something. Of course, we want to have love working in our souls. The presence of love in our hearts is a sign that this affection is perhaps ready to work as it should.

But we must make sure that love, which Edwards described as the supreme or commanding affection, is *focused* on the right objects – namely, God and our neighbors – and with the *proper intensity*. We must love the

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Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and our neighbors as ourselves. We must *not* love the world, as the apostles John and James warned. We must *not* love sin. We *must* love God and our neighbors. Love is *rightly focused* when it aims at those objects God prescribes.

We must love God *with all our hearts* – surely a condition we will spend our lives working to improve – and our neighbors *as we love ourselves*, so that we treat them with the same care and concern with which we treat ourselves. This we shall have to spend the rest of our lives improving in every possible way.

The affection of love within us is rightly focused and with proper intensity when it meets the criteria spelled out for us in Scripture.

So true religion consists in making sure that we understand affections, that all our affections are engaged and properly focused, and that we are guarding and developing our affections – keeping watch over our hearts, as Solomon has it – so that we may continue to grow and flourish in a vigorous and lively expression of faith. Keeping our hearts means keeping them strong in all the affections God has set there, and all the affections properly focused and intensified.

We cannot expect to grow in true faith without such diligent guarding and nurturing of our hearts.

For reflection

1. List as many as you can of the affections that incline us *toward* someone or something. Explain each of these.
2. List as many as you can of the affections that incline us *away* from someone or something. Explain each of these.
3. Give examples of how each of these affections are valid for the life of faith.

Next steps – Conversation: What do the nonbelievers in your Personal Mission Field love most? Ask a few: “What’s most important to you? What do you think about most, or what would you most like to have, be, or do?” What do you learn from this about the role of the heart in people’s lives?

4 Hate and Its Like

You who love the LORD, hate evil! Psalm 97:10

Affections and healthy faith

Affections are of two kinds: those that incline us *toward* someone or something, and those which lead us to *turn away*. We have seen that both kinds of affections are necessary for healthy Christian faith. Keeping our heart with all diligence involves understanding, engaging, focusing, and nurturing those affections that incline us *toward* something or someone – such as love. Likewise, we must understand, engage, focus, and nurture those affections that cause us to *draw back* from something or someone – such as hate.

In Edwards' understanding of the affections, *hate* is not a “four-letter word.” It is a perfectly valid and useful affection which, when properly understood and engaged, and focused with the right intensity, can, with other similar affections, help us to know a greater measure of true and lively faith in God.

We need to explore this a bit further, especially since, in our day, it is not fashionable, or, at least, not considered to be part of our Christian calling, to harbor affections such as hate, anger, sorrow, and the like. These come, as we know, but contemporary Christian teaching, not understanding these affections as God intends, tries to deny, gloss over, or eradicate them, preferring instead to concentrate on more “positive” affections such as love, compassion, and joy.

This is why we seldom hear about any place for hate or fear or dread or sorrow in the preaching and teaching of the church, but only happiness, peace, joy, and love.

But this is to misunderstand the nature of affections. Moreover, when affections such as hate are not properly understood, engaged, focused, and nurtured, we become vulnerable to the misapplication of these and other affections in ways that can rob us of a vigorous and fervent life of following Jesus Christ.

Hate evil

Our text commands the believer who loves the Lord to *hate* evil. We all know what hate feels like – a combination of loathing, disgust, anger, and a desire either to destroy the object of our hatred or be removed as far from it as possible. That seems like a proper sort of inclination toward sin, don't you agree? Think where we'd be today if Adam and Eve had hated sin rather than fallen through the temptation of wanting to be like God into sin's throes and woes!

Edwards explained, perhaps following the logic of our text, that we can only learn to hate – only learn those affections that cause us to draw back from something – as we cultivate and practice those affections that incline us to draw near. He says, “From a vigorous, affectionate, and fervent *love to God*, will necessarily arise other *religious* affections; hence will arise an intense *hatred* and a *fear* of sin; a *dread* of God's displeasure; *gratitude* to God for his goodness; *complacence* and *joy* in God when he is graciously and sensibly present; *grief* when he is absent; a joyful *hope* when a future enjoyment of God is expected; and fervent *zeal* for the divine glory.”

It would be safe to say, in the light of this, that we cannot love God and sin at the same time. Indeed, we cannot be said truly to love God so long as we insist on loving sin, or delighting to practice sin in any way.

In the same way, *indifference* to things we are supposed to love, or a *lackadaisical* or *cavalier* attitude toward such things as spiritual disciplines, worship, and the pursuit of holiness, will leave space for us to begin loving such things as *spiritual indolence* and a kind of *status quo* Christianity.

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Getting it right

We must love the things we are to love and hate the thing we are to hate; rejoice in the presence of that which elicits holy joy and weep before that which brings holy sorrow; and press with fervor to attain the upward prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus, fleeing everything which inclines us to lethargy, an unguarded heart, or sin.

Negative affections are as powerful as the strongest *positive* affections, but they can only function in our hearts as God intends to the extent we take the time to understand, engage, focus, and nurture them in line with the teaching of God's Word. This is an important part of the discipline of keeping our hearts, so that whatever flows from them will be holy and righteous and good, bringing the heart of Jesus to bear on the hearts and lives of those to whom He sends us.

It's clear that understanding, engaging, focusing, and nurturing religious affections is going to require much more of us than most of us have perhaps been willing thus far to invest. But the stakes – a vigorous and lively faith – are high; we must not fail to rise to the challenge.

For reflection

1. Explain how hate – and disgust, anger, revulsion, and so forth – can be a proper affection for a Christian.
2. How could you tell if hate was beginning to go awry in your heart?
3. How can Christians help one another develop proper affections?

Next steps – Preparation: What do you hate? Do you hate what you should? Everything you should? Share your thoughts about this with a Christian friend. How does your church work to help people develop proper affections?

5 Heat and Light

... *put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind...* Ephesians 4.22, 23

Right thinking

All this focus on affections might lead some to believe that *right thinking* doesn't have much of a part in the life of faith. As long as we're *feeling* the right way, toward the right objects, and with the right degree of intensity, then all must be well in our walk with the Lord.

Well, no.

We have the mind of Christ, and having the mind of Christ, and being continuously *renewed* in the mind of Christ, is crucial to getting our affections right. The heart must engage the mind in our souls if affections are to perform their proper work. As Edwards put it, "Holy affections are not heat without light; but evermore arise from some information of the understanding, some spiritual instruction that the mind receives, some light of actual knowledge."

Keeping the heart and renewing the mind go hand in hand in helping us to grow strong and mature in our souls.

Key to the heart

Edwards further wrote, "Knowledge is the key that first opens the heart, enlarges the affections, and opens the way for men into the kingdom of heaven..." Of what does this knowledge consist, and where shall we go to obtain this knowledge? Since right *knowledge* is the key to having a right *heart*, we need to be as diligent in developing our minds as in nurturing and guarding our hearts. But we need to know *where* to look and *what* to look for.

Edwards nicely summarizes the kind of knowledge we must seek: "therefore the kind of understanding or knowledge, which is the proper foundation of true religion, must be the knowledge of the *loveliness of divine things*." Only when the things of God appear to our minds to be *lovelier* and, hence, more *desirable* than the things of the world and the flesh, only then will our affections go out to those things with the kind of vigor they deserve.

We need to read and study about divine things, pondering and weighing them carefully to discern their inherent beauty and desirability. With respect to the heart, this means learning as much as we can about affections and how God intends them to work.

Begin here

It will not surprise us that the place to begin such studies, of course, is in the Word of God. In Scripture God has given us ample expression of His character and will, and in a wide range of literary genre and forms, so that we may obtain a clear look at His loveliness through constant resort to His Word. As with the renewing of our mind, this means we must be *willing* to invest the time required for reading, study, and meditation in the Bible, paying attention to whatever the Scriptures teach about the proper use of affections. It is hard work acquiring such knowledge of divine things as is necessary for the right shaping of our affections. If we're not willing to take the time to do this, or if we find reading and study of God's Word tedious, then we will not be able to develop our affections to the degree of vigor and fervency that indicates true and saving faith.

Put another way, if you're not willing to spend time in Scripture – regularly, deeply, and reflectively – that is, if you know there is a source where you may discover and learn the beautiful things of God and His will, and

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you are too busy or lazy or undisciplined to go there, then you're not likely to make any progress in renewing your mind or keeping your heart.

Because all this would mean is that your affections – especially such affections as desire, love, anticipation, longing, and joy – are lodged somewhere other than in the pursuit of God and divine things. You prefer to sleep, or watch TV, or work, or read the papers, or consort with your friends, or play video games, or listen to music, rather than to set aside time to discover the beauty of God.

Anyone for whom this is the case will never learn how beautiful God is, and will never overcome his love of other things to loving God with *all* the heart. If we will not devote the time and effort to seeking the beautiful things of God in His Word – reading and studying to learn how we can be more like Him in our thinking and affections – we show that our greatest love goes out to other things, we do not love God as we ought, and, consequently, we have good reason to doubt the reality of our faith in Him.

Vigorous affections and true and lively faith begin in knowledge – the knowledge of God and His loveliness. Only a clear and growing vision of God can help us gain the perspective on our own hearts that will allow affections to do their proper work in our lives. We must pursue such knowledge daily and diligently, to keep and nurture our hearts in line with God's good and perfect plan.

For reflection

1. The mind and heart must work together to get our affections right. Explain.
2. Can you think of a passage of Scripture that speaks of the beauty of the Lord? How does His beauty come to light there? How would you describe His beauty?
3. Suggest some passages you might use to encourage another believer to meditate on the loveliness of God. Explain how you would meditate on these passages.

Next steps – Preparation: Is your time in God's Word sufficient to open your heart to love Him above all else? Today, take specific time in prayer to wait on the Lord as He searches your heart and prepares you for the day ahead.

6 Nurturing Affections

... let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Hebrews 10.22

Engaging the affections

As we look to the Word of God, our desire, wherever we may be reading, is at least in part to instruct our minds in the beautiful things of God and His will. We need to pay careful attention to the teaching of Scripture about affections – what they are, how they should be focused, and how they may be made more vigorous. By being alert to whatever Scripture teaches about affections, we can begin nurturing our hearts consistently with the kind of holy affections that are the fruit of a true and vibrant faith.

Jonathan Edwards has some very good suggestions about how we may do this. He writes, “If true religion lies much in the *affections*, we may infer, that such means are to be desired, as have much tendency to move the affections.” By “move” here he means to engage them, get them properly focused, and begin to nurture them to a growing vigor or fervor. To what means shall we turn?

Prayer

First, Edwards says we must turn to prayer. Here’s what he says: “...in the duty of *prayer*, it is manifest, we are not appointed, in this duty, to declare God’s perfections, his majesty, holiness, goodness, and all-sufficiency; our own meanness, emptiness, dependence, and unworthiness, our wants and desires, in order to inform God of these things, or to incline his heart, and prevail with him to be willing to show us mercy; but rather suitably to affect our own hearts with the things we express, and so to prepare us to receive the blessings we ask.”

Now let’s not miss this. Edwards is *not* saying we shouldn’t exalt God in prayer, humble ourselves before Him, and lay our requests at His feet. He’s saying we *should* do this, but not to *inform* or *persuade* God as much as to *affect our own hearts* with God’s greatness and our utter and complete dependence on Him. Prayer provides a conversational setting in which we may *visualize* the beautiful things of God and *reflect* on the state of our affections before Him.

Prayer is a context, in other words, for talking with God so that the way *God* sees things – Himself, our lives, our needs, and so forth – becomes the way *we* see them as well. This can be an invaluable aid in nurturing godly affections.

Singing

Second, Edwards recommends singing as an aid to nurturing godly affections. He writes, “No other reason can be assigned, why we should express ourselves in verse, rather than in prose, and do it with music, but only, that such is our nature and frame, that these things have a tendency to move our affections.”

He’s right, of course. We all understand the power of music to engage and move our affections. Music can lift our spirits, bring us to tears of joy, move us to boldness and shouting, and much more. So why don’t we sing any more than we do? Scripture offers many instances of commands to sing to the Lord, but not a single instruction merely to *listen* to Christian music. Yet where the music of our faith is concerned, this is where most of us find ourselves engaged. Perhaps we have our priorities mixed up?

The sacraments

Third, Edwards says that the *sacraments* of the Church should be a resource to move our affections. Such “sensible representations,” as Edwards called them, of the work of Christ as we encounter in baptism and the Lord’s Supper are designed to affect our hearts and not just engage our bodies in rote activities. The better we *prepare* for the sacraments, and the more faithfully and devoutly we apply our hearts and minds to *participating*

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in them, the more they will help nurture the kind of affections that lead to godliness in Christ Jesus.

Preaching

Edwards also mentions the role of *preaching* in shaping our affections: “God hath appointed a particular and lively application of his word, in the preaching of it, as a fit means to affect sinners with the importance of religion, their own misery, the necessity of a remedy, and the glory and sufficiency of a remedy provided; to stir up the pure minds of the saints, quicken their affections by often bringing the great things of religion to their remembrance, and setting them in their proper colours...” Here is counsel to pay careful attention to the preaching of the Word, so that we don’t miss the ways Scripture can move, convict, and improve our hearts.

Keep it up

Finally, Edwards insists that affections must be nurtured through *practice*, what he calls “a spirit of earnestness in the Christian work and course.” We must apply ourselves in daily life to suppress and overcome affections that distract us from our walk with the Lord, and to implant and improve those that do. Only daily practice, walking in obedience to the Lord, will bring together all these other means to help us grow in godly affections as we should.

We can grow our hearts and keep them growing toward maturity in Christ, but we must do so consciously and conscientiously, waiting on the Lord to cleanse, renew, and improve this liveliest spring of our Christian lives.

For reflection

1. Why is prayer an excellent place to work on keeping our hearts?
2. Can you think of a hymn or praise song that especially engages your affections? In what ways? How does feeling this way affect your walk with and work for the Lord?
3. Explain how taking the Lord’s Supper should affect our hearts. Which affections should we expect to experience? How can taking the Supper *improve* our affections?

Next steps – Transformation: How many of these “means” for nurturing proper affections are in place in your life? Where can you improve? Find a prayer partner to pray with you as you work out a better regimen for nurturing the affections of your heart.

7 The Holy Spirit and Affections

“It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life.” John 6.63

The vital principle of our souls

The holy affections that animate a vigorous and lively Christian faith rise from our hearts as we apply ourselves to the task of identifying, understanding, engaging, focusing, and nurturing them. The more we pay attention to this, the more our hearts will grow strong in the Lord, our faith will grow, and the more we will know that the faith we confess is true faith in Jesus Christ, and not merely some shallow affirmation of a few theological ideas.

Ultimately, only the Holy Spirit can bring forth godly affections in us. Jonathan Edwards writes that the Holy Spirit, “dwelling as a vital principle in the souls, produces those effects wherein he exerts and communicates himself in his own *proper nature*.” He hastens to add, “Holiness is the nature of the Spirit of God...” The Spirit of God within the believer is the *Holy Spirit*, and He alone, working with the Word of God, can bring true life to light within us. The life which He does cause to grow in us will be the light of holiness, so that “not only the persons are called *spiritual*, as having the Spirit of God dwelling in them; but those qualifications, affections, and experiences that are wrought in them by the Spirit, are also *spiritual*.”

That is, as the *Holy Spirit* is both *spiritual* and *holy*, so, as He works to nurture our hearts, may we expect to grow as spiritual and holy persons in Jesus Christ.

Growing in God’s Spirit

How can we make sure that the Spirit of God has ample opportunity to do His work in us of bringing forth those godly affections that are true religion and lively faith? Let me suggest some components of a vital, growing relationship with the Holy Spirit.

First, cleanse your life of everything that is *contrary* to holiness and the Spirit of God. You cannot hold on to sin; you cannot continue to squander time that should be devoted to seeking the Lord; you cannot *not* devote yourself to growing in Christ, and expect that the Spirit of God is going to cooperate with you one whit. He will not.

The Spirit works in men and women whose spirits are willing to be shaped and formed by Him, and not those who simply want to put Him up in some back room of their souls for the sake of showing Him off to impress others from time to time. He wants – He demands – our whole lives, the whole house of our being, and He will not share it with unsavory or frivolous guests.

Second, understand what the Spirit is trying to do in your life, and make sure you’re pulling your oars in the same direction as He. The Spirit wants to bring forth spiritual fruit in you (Gal. 5.22, 23); to equip and deploy you with spiritual gifts in service to others (1 Cor. 12.7-11); and to embolden you for witness to Jesus Christ in the everyday situations of your life (Acts 1.8). He wants to conform your thoughts, feelings, priorities, and daily practices to what Jesus would feel, think, and do were He in your place (2 Cor. 3.12-18).

He wants you to become like Jesus, loving God and others, denying yourself, taking up your cross each day, and following Him along the path of revival, renewal, and awakening. When such aspiration is the guiding affection of our souls, the Spirit will work powerfully within us to will and do of God’s good pleasure (Phil. 2.12, 13).

Third, the Spirit searches our hearts and minds that He may convict us of sin, righteousness, and judgment as is necessary (Ps. 139.23, 24; Jn. 16.8-11). We must be willing for this to be a part of our daily walk with the

Keep Your Heart

Spirit, so that He may purge us of our sins, instruct us in the way we should go, instill in us fear and dread of offending our heavenly Father, and fill us with Himself.

Hard – but necessary – work

If we're going to grow in our faith, it will only be to the extent that we keep our hearts with all diligence, understanding, engaging, focusing, and nurturing those affections which incline us to love the Lord with all our hearts and our neighbors as ourselves. This is hard work, daily work, and if we're not willing to take it up then we're simply admitting that we're not willing to be and have what God intends for us.

But, oh, the joy, the power, the beauty, the increase of righteousness and fruitfulness that await those who devote themselves to nurturing godly affections in their souls! The opportunity for you to keep your heart with all vigilance is before you every day. Do so with vigor and joy, knowing that God will bless and enrich you for it.

For reflection

1. How would you describe the work of the Holy Spirit in keeping and shaping our hearts?
2. Why do some Christians find it so difficult to devote the time and effort necessary for keeping their heart with all diligence?
3. How would you expect to know when your affections – your heart – was becoming more like the heart of God?

Next steps – Conversation: Share this article with a Christian friend, then meet to discuss it. How can you help and encourage one another to “get in step” with the Spirit and what He’s trying to do in your life?

Keep Your Heart

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. What is the heart? How does it relate to the other two components or faculties of the souls?
2. What are the two different kinds of affections? Give examples of each.
3. What does it mean to “keep” our heart with all diligence? Why is this so important?
4. How would you counsel a new believer to keep his heart with all diligence?
5. What’s the most important lesson you’ve learned from this study about keeping your heart? How are you applying that lesson in your walk with and work for the Lord?

Prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

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The Fellowship of Ailbe offers many opportunities for training, prayer, personal growth, and ministry. Visit our website at www.ailbe.org to learn more.

We hope you found this study helpful. If so, please consider making a gift to The Fellowship. You can contribute to our ministry by using the contribute button at the website, or by sending your gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, 19 Tyler Dr., Essex Junction, VT 05452.

Thank you.