

Warnings and Encouragements

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[0 : 00] When Jesus was asked, which is the great commandment in the law, he replied, you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.

This is the first and great commandment. As we near the end of John Flavel's book, Keeping the Heart, Flavel offers both some warnings and some encouragements, and we'll begin with his warnings.

He writes, Interestingly enough, Jesus doesn't mention the body. He doesn't say you shall love the Lord with all your body or with all your behaviors and activities.

And that isn't because what we do in the body doesn't matter. It's because what we do in the body, number one, flows from the heart, and number two, is meaningless without the heart.

Consider what Paul says about love in 1 Corinthians 13. You see, just because we do something good doesn't mean we're doing it sincerely.

[2 : 20] Let's say I'm a wealthy businessman trying to bolster my company's reputation. I might give thousands, if not millions of dollars to charity, but I could be doing it for entirely self-serving reasons.

I'm not giving out of love necessarily. I'm not giving to please God. I may not even give because I care anything about the charity I'm supporting. I'm giving to benefit myself.

So my actions are right, but my heart is all wrong, and this makes my actions meaningless. Worse than that, I've become a hypocrite of the worst kind.

As Flavel says, the great work of a Christian is to keep the heart in which the very soul and life of Christianity consists.

And this work is the foundation of all acceptable duties to God. Perhaps you've noticed this same theme throughout the entirety of Israel's history in the Old Testament.

[3 : 24] For example, the Lord, through the prophet Joel, warns the people of Judah, this is Joel chapter 2, Return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning, and rend your hearts and not your garments.

What's the concern here? Are the people of Judah blatantly sinning? Are they failing to offer the appropriate sacrifices?

Are they failing to keep the Sabbath? Well, probably many of those things. But unless I've overlooked something, Joel himself never mentions any particular sin. Instead, he accuses them of drunkenness, spiritual drunkenness.

He accuses them of a spiritual apathy. They've become complacent. Their love for God has grown cold. So perhaps they're still going through many of the motions of their religion, but something is terribly wrong.

What is it? Well, notice what he says. Return to me with all your heart. Yes, you should fast and you should weep, but certainly not for appearance's sake.

[4 : 42] God says, I want your heart. Return to me with all your heart. Then he specifically says, never mind rending your garments. Even a wild animal can go and rip clothing.

No, he says, rend your hearts. Rend your hearts. I want your hearts to repent. And that is what the Lord has always wanted from his people.

He wants our hearts. When we read about the sins and rebellions of Israel in the Old Testament, the underlying issue is always the heart, which is why the new covenant spoken by Ezekiel and Jeremiah and the prophets always address the hearts.

And I will give them one heart. I will give them a new heart. And a new spirit will I put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh.

If the heart isn't changed, all external reforms will be meaningless. They're worthless. And this is very well demonstrated in the New Testament during the ministry of Christ.

[5 : 53] Think of the Pharisees, those religious leaders of the first century. Nearly 200 years before Christ, the Pharisees began as a grassroots movement, if you will, against Greek Hellenism and pagan influence over Israel.

They believed in serving God and staying obedient to his commandments despite this shifting culture. In short, it was a good thing. This movement was a good thing.

They were the people who remained faithful to God while most of the nation allowed pagan influence to take root. But what happened? Well, when John the Baptist begins his ministry, he very quickly indicts the Pharisees.

In Matthew 3, he says, You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. Repentance?

I mean, what does John mean by repentance? They were the repenters, right? Weren't they the people who remained loyal to God while everyone else fell away to some degree or another?

[7 : 03] Well, yes and no. The Pharisees may have remained loyal by all appearances, but they were just as far from God as anyone else.

When Jesus began speaking about them during his ministry, he continually refers to them as hypocrites. In his Sermon on the Mount, he teaches the people to pray, to tithe, to fast, but not like the Pharisees.

Not like them. Why? They were hypocrites. Yes, they prayed, and they tithed, and they fasted, but they were performing empty rituals. Or consider the Pharisee who went into the temple to pray.

He could boast of all of his good works and the fact that he was not a blatant sinner like this tax collector over here who was also in the temple praying, but Jesus said he wasn't justified.

His faith wasn't authentic. He was a hypocrite. He made a good show of righteousness, but it was all for nothing because the most essential element was missing.

[8 : 14] The heart. Flavel writes, Tell me, vain pretender, When did you shed a tear for the deadness, hardness, unbelief, or earthliness of your heart?

Do you think that such an easy religion can save you? If so, we may invert Christ's words and say, Wide is the gate, and broad is the way that leads to life, and many there are that enter in.

Hear me, you self-deceiving hypocrite, you who have put off God with heartless duties, who have acted in religion as if you had been worshiping an idol that could not search and discover your heart, and who have offered to God only the skin of the sacrifice, but not the marrow, fat, and meat of it.

How will you abide the coming of the Lord? This is strong language, but rightfully so. Remember that no one in the Bible spoke more about hell than Jesus, and he was ministering among religious Jews, not pagan Gentiles.

When he warns about the reality of hell, he's not speaking directly to people who worship idols or false gods. He's not speaking to people who openly reject Yahweh, the one true God.

[10 : 04] He's speaking to God's covenant people who claim to love God and keep his law. And yet, he warns of hell more often than anyone else in Scripture.

As Jesus brings his sermon on the mount to a close, he says this, Enter by the narrow gate, for the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many.

For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few. Every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit.

A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

Thus, you will recognize them by their fruits. Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.

[11 : 14] On that day, many will say to me, Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and cast out demons in your name and do many mighty works in your name? And then I will declare to them, I never knew you.

Depart from me, you workers of lawlessness. Let's see whether I can summarize this. First of all, Jesus warns that most people, most people are not on the path that leads to life, which should get our attention very quickly.

That's a sobering thought. Second, he says, people will be known by the fruit they bear. Specifically, he says people will bear fruit according to their nature. A bad tree produces bad fruit, a good tree produces good fruit. Or we might say, evil comes from an evil heart, while righteousness comes from a righteous heart. Now, that's simple enough, but notice the third lesson. not everyone who seems to bear good fruit is actually bearing good fruit.

[12 : 29] Have you ever bought produce from a grocery store only to find out it was rotten on the inside? That's what Jesus says will be revealed about many people.

They will have done good works in his name. They will have called him Lord. In fact, they will have been emphatic about it. Lord, Lord, they say.

But in the end, Jesus will say to them, I never knew you. Depart from me, you workers of lawlessness. That's a terrifying passage.

Of course, we all want to know, where did they go wrong? They appeared to be doing everything right. We could probably argue that they themselves believed they were doing everything right. So, what happened? Well, listen to what Jesus would later say to the Pharisees. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, for you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence.

[13 : 44] You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside may also be clean. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, for you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness.

So, you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. And what did he say to Nicodemus, the Pharisee?

Truly, truly, I say unto you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. And to that, Nicodemus was confounded.

How can a man be born when he is old? How can he enter in a second time into his mother's womb and be born? Does it make sense? Of course, Jesus wasn't talking about a physical birth.

He was talking about a spiritual, internal birth. He was talking about a contrite heart, turning to the Lord in faith, knowing he has no hope apart from Christ.

[15 : 03] He was talking about a person whose very nature is changed by the Holy Spirit. Public religion will come later. It will follow. Jesus says we need private and personal reformation within.

Otherwise, that public religion is for naught. Flavel writes, Oh, tremble to think what a fearful judgment is to be given over to a heedless and careless heart, only using religious duties to quiet and still your conscience.

That was Israel's problem in the Old Testament. That was the Pharisees' problem in the New Testament. And that's the problem for many, many religious people today.

Hypocrites abound in churches around the world. And I'm using that word in the truest sense. I'm talking about someone who appears to be something they absolutely are not.

That is why Paul, writing to a Christian church, mind you, albeit a church with their fair share of moral problems, can say in 2 Corinthians 13, examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith.

[16 : 28] Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you? Unless, unless indeed, you fail to meet the test.

I still have the King James Version memorized, which says, Know ye not your own selves? How that Jesus Christ is in you, except or unless ye be reprobates?

Paul might have said, Examine your hearts. Don't tell me how often you go to church, or read your Bible, or give money to the poor. As important as those things are, let's open up that fruit.

What's on the inside? Where is your heart? Now, to be clear, this is not meant to cripple a genuine believer with fear that he or she might not be saved.

These warnings by playful, not to mention scripture, are intended for precisely what Proverbs 4.23 says. Keep or guard your heart with all vigilance.

[17 : 38] Flavel writes, Here, I also conclude, to the shame of even upright hearts, that unless the people of God spend more time and labor on their hearts than they ordinarily do, they are likely never to do God much service or to attain much comfort in this life.

He goes on to say, There are two things that have, quote, eaten up the time and strength of the church in this generation and sadly diverted us from heart work.

And those two things are, number one, fruitless controversies, and number two, earthly encumbrances. And I don't believe his list is exhausted by any means.

First, by fruitless controversies, he means those silly things we often fight about or consume ourselves with in the church. I like what he says.

Oh, how much better it is to see believers live rightly than to hear them dispute subtly. Second, and perhaps more pertinent, he mentions earthly encumbrances.

[18 : 53] He says, The heads and hearts of many have been so filled with the noise of worldly business that they have sadly and sensibly declined and withered in their zeal, love, and delight in God and in their ability to talk seriously and profitably about heavenly things with others.

Of course, the implication in all of this is that we are failing to tend our hearts through this. We are treating our hearts like we would never treat our bodies.

If you fail to feed your body, you starve to death. Well, imagine what happens to the heart from which flow the springs of life, Proverbs says, if we starve it.

So as Flavel encourages us to do, tend your heart, don't neglect the heart. He writes, Oh, study your hearts, watch your hearts, and keep your hearts.

Rid yourselves of fruitless controversies and idle questions, empty titles and vain performances, unprofitable debates, and bold censures of others.

[20 : 05] Turn in upon yourselves, get into your prayer closet, and then resolve to dwell there. For too long, you have been strangers to this work, kept other vineyards, and trifled around the borders of Christianity.

For too long, this world has detained you from your great work. Will you now resolve to look more to your hearts? Will you hurry and come out of the crowds of business and the clamors of the world to spend time with God more than you have done?

Oh, that this would be the day you would resolve to do it. And I love this. He goes on to suggest that we pause every night and ask ourselves, Oh, my heart, where have you been today?

Where have you traveled today? So now let's turn to consider Flavel's encouragement for us.

He offers us ten motives to keep our hearts. We might call these spiritual blessings if we strive to keep our hearts. Number one, increased spiritual understanding.

[21 : 21] Increased spiritual understanding. I think we all understand that there's a difference between having knowledge of something and truly knowing it or truly understanding it.

And I'll give you an example from my own life. I was a professing Christian and was baptized at the age of 11. I stood up in front of the entire church and confessed that I was a sinner whom only Christ could save.

But it wasn't until years later that my sinfulness actually broke me. It wasn't until years later that I experienced a godly sorrow over my sin.

I was in my early 20s before I ever called out to the Lord for salvation. You see, when I was 11, I knew the gospel. I knew what salvation was all about.

I knew it in my head, that is. But it took me another decade before that understanding penetrated my heart. That is why Paul prays the way he does in Ephesians chapter 1.

[22 : 39] He says to the believers in Ephesus, may God give you the spirit of wisdom and of revelation and the knowledge of him having the eyes of your hearts enlightened.

You see, he doesn't want them to merely know something. Anyone can read the Bible and learn the facts. I've known some staunch unbelievers who probably know the Bible better than many Christians.

But head knowledge is not the same as heart knowledge. So Paul prays that the Ephesians' hearts would be enlightened. And it's only after God reveals things to our hearts that we truly understand. I was talking with someone the other day about an unfortunate situation he's in. And quite naturally, he was looking for a solution to his problem by suggesting ways he could change his circumstances.

If only this would happen, then things would be better. So I pointed him to 2 Corinthians 12. That's where Paul has the thorn in his flesh.

[23 : 51] And he pleads with God to take it away. But God says no. He says, my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in your weakness.

In other words, Paul's circumstances didn't change at all. He still had the thorn. He was still suffering. Nothing external had changed. And yet, what does Paul say in response?

I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses that the power of Christ may rest upon me. The King James goes as far as to have Paul say, therefore, I take pleasure in my infirmities.

What changed for Paul? If not his circumstances, what changed? Well, his understanding. We might say the Lord opened the eyes of his heart to know, number one, the power of Christ and his weakness.

And maybe, number two, God's ordained purpose for his weakness. regardless, his understanding deepened without any external means, without any circumstances changing.

[25 : 06] He learned it here in his heart. And that changed everything. Number two, protection from errors.

Protection from errors. errors. Here's what Flabel writes about it. The study and observation of your own heart will inoculate you against the dangerous and infecting errors of the times and places that you live in.

What is the reason that so many thousands have been led away by the errors of the wicked? And why have those who have sown false doctrines had such a plentiful harvest among us?

It is because they have met with a company of empty, nominal believers that never knew what belongs to practical godliness and the study of their own hearts.

I think about this whenever I see one of those video clips circulating online of a lesbian pastor wearing a rainbow flag talking about how God is a woman the resurrection was a hallucination and all kinds of other blasphemous ideas and I hear this and I think to myself, who is getting up every Sunday morning to go to this place to hear this nonsense, probably financially support it and just generally be a part of it?

[26 : 41] While I can comprehend someone wanting to hear what they want to hear, many, many churches, so called churches today have utterly dismantled the Bible and destroyed the Christian faith.

So I'm left asking, why bother with any of it? What's the point of the church in that case? Well, if nothing else, it provides an example of what heartless Christianity can descend into, how far it can deviate from the truth of God.

If these video clips are any indication, evidently a heartless form of Christianity can destroy common sense itself. Why would anyone profess to be a disciple of Christ when they reject his word, they don't believe he was God, and they deny his resurrection?

It defies all logic. Now, obviously that's an extreme example, but the point is that an unguarded heart is like a boat without an anchor.

To avoid, as Paul said, being tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness and deceitful schemes, we need hearts that we've examined and humbled and allowed the word of God to shape.

[28 : 10] We need to safeguard our heart against cultural pressures and against even our own personal desires. Number three, assurance of salvation.

Assurance of salvation. Let me ask you this, what separates a genuine Christian from a religious hypocrite who merely professes to be a Christian?

Christian? What's the difference between a truly saved person and an unsaved person who may very well sit next to you on the pew every Sunday? What separates the true Christian from those described by Jesus in Matthew 7 who behaved like disciples in many respects but were in fact unrighteous, hell-bound sinners?

Well, once again, it's the heart. Listen to Flable on this point. It is amazing to consider how far hypocrites will go in all external duties and how plausibly they can order the outward man, hiding all their indecencies from the observation of the world, but they take no heed to their hearts.

They are not in secret what they appear to be in public. So, one of the best means of being confident of your salvation is to examine not your works, but your heart.

[29 : 51] Do you find devotion? Do you find sincerity? What motivates you to do the works you are doing? Number four.

Increased joy in your duties. Increased joy in your duties. In a previous chapter of his book, Flable said, a heart seasoned with grace makes every duty pleasant.

The more the heart seeks God, pines for God, pursues God, and is kept guarded from everything else, the more we will want to seek him and the more enjoyable it will be.

In the denomination of my upbringing, there was a tradition where visiting preachers, invited or not, would almost always be asked to preach if they showed up to a service on Sunday morning. So, let's say one was traveling and he stopped at a church away from home. If the pastor knew him or discovered he was a preacher, he would be asked to preach. Preach the word, be ready, in season and out of season, right?

[31 : 07] Now, I've thoroughly enjoyed preaching and teaching for years, but I quickly learned when you're not quite prepared for the task, preaching feels a little more terrifying than it does enjoyable.

Well, I think this principle is true for all of our spiritual duties. Consider Psalm 40, verse 8. I delight to do your will, O my God. Your law is written, your law, excuse me, is within my heart. Having God's law in his heart caused David to feel delight when keeping that law.

Number five, more focused prayers. More focused prayers. Flavel says, acquaintance with your own hearts can also be a fountain that supplies you in prayer.

Those who are diligent in heartwork and know the state of their own souls will have an overflowing fountain of praises and prayers to supply them in all their addresses to God.

[32 : 21] The tongue will not falter for something to pray. And this is confirmed in Scripture. Psalm 45, 1 says, My heart overflows with a pleasing theme.

I address my verses to the king. My tongue is like the pin of a ready scribe. What did Jesus say? For out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.

Flavel writes, When you are experienced with your heart and mourn before God over a specific heart corruption or wrestle before God for the supply of some special inward need, you do not speak as others do who have learned to pray by rote.

Their confessions and petitions are squeezed out, but yours drop freely like pure honey from the comb. Number six, recovery of spiritual power.

Recovery of spiritual power. When you read this chapter of Flavel's book, it becomes apparent that he's sincerely troubled by the volume of nominal or hypocritical or false Christians in his day.

[33 : 40] he says in this way, by examining and keeping your heart, the decaying power of Christianity will be recovered again among believers, which is the most desirable sight in this world.

Oh, that I might live to see that day when Christians will not walk in a vain show, when they will no longer please themselves with the appearance of life while being spiritually dead, and when they will no longer be, as many are now, a company of superficial, vain persons.

Instead, the majestic beams of holiness will shine from their heavenly and serious speech that will awe the world and command reverence from everyone around them, and they will warm the hearts of all who come near to them so that everyone will say, God is truly in these people.

for the glory of Christ, the church needs its members to put in what Flavel so often calls heart work. Number seven, removal of stumbling blocks. Removal of stumbling blocks. Flavel says a neglected, careless heart must necessarily produce a disordered, scandalous life.

[35 : 10] He goes on to say, Oh, professors, if you are ever to keep religion sweet, and if you ever hope to recover your testimony in the world, keep your hearts.

Either keep your hearts or lose your testimony. Keep your hearts or lose your comforts. keep your hearts lest you shed the blood of souls.

What words can express the deep importance and the wonderful consequences of this work? Everything reveals it to be necessary, serious, and beautiful.

Again, from the heart flow the springs of life. Left unguarded, untended, unkept, the heart will naturally produce all kinds of unwanted stumbling blocks in our lives.

Number eight, preparation for the future. Preparation for the future. Think about what Paul said of himself in 1 Corinthians 9.

[36 : 24] Verse 27, he said, I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.

So, here Paul is, doing the work God has called him to do, but he realizes that he may not be fit for the same work in the future unless he gives attention to himself.

If, on the other hand, he had neglected himself, neglected his heart, he would be disqualified from the ministry and any work God intended for him.

In 2 Timothy 2.21, Paul writes, if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use. Set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good

work.

Label says, consider a man who has not learned to keep his heart. If you give him any service for God that is attended with honor, it will swell up his spirit in pride.

[37 : 36] If you give him suffering, it will depress and sink him. And chances are we've all known examples of this if we haven't learned it firsthand. Number 10, increased benefit from spiritual duties.

Increased benefit from spiritual duties. Here's what Label says. By keeping your heart, the comforts of the spirit and the precious influences of all the ordinances would be established and much longer preserved in your soul than they are now.

Ah, what I would give for my soul to be preserved in the frame that I sometimes find it in after an ordinance. Sometimes, O Lord, you admit me into the most inward, unusual, and sweet delights. But alas, the heart grows careless again and quickly returns like water removed from the stove to its native coldness. If you could only keep those things forever in your hearts, what Christian would you be?

What lives would you live? But how is it that these things do not remain longer with us? Doubtless, it is because we allow our hearts to become cold again.

[38 : 58] We should be as careful after an ordinance or spiritual duty to prevent this as one that comes out of a hot bath is of going into the chill air. We have our hot and cold fits in their terms and what is the reason but our unskillfulness and carelessness and keeping the heart.

Perhaps you attended worship that left you feeling spiritually nourished and even excited. In fact, God's presence was so full that you didn't even want to leave that place.

You just wanted to stay forever. But once you did leave, maybe it's the following day you started to feel spiritually cold again. Your soul went from hot to cold in a single day.

Well, what do you do? You could do nothing. You could just wait for another Sunday service perhaps, hoping to have the same experience again, or you could nourish your heart in the meantime.

Strive to keep it oriented toward heavenly things. Stay in communion with God. Watch your heart carefully and fight against all its enemies.

[40 : 18] Pay attention to the heart. Keep the heart. I'll close with another word from Flabel. Look over these ten special benefits and weigh them on just scales.

Are they small matters? Is it a small matter to have your weak understanding assisted, your endangered soul cured, your sincerity cleared, your communion with God sweetened, and your sails filled in prayer?

Is it a small thing to have the decaying power of godliness again restored, to have all fatal scandals removed, to gain an instrumental fitness for serving Christ, to restore the communion of saints to its original glory, and to have the influences of the ordinances abiding in the souls of saints?

If these are no common blessings or small benefits, then surely it is a great duty to keep the heart with all diligence.

Let's pray. Father, you see our hearts as they truly are. Search us and know us.

[41 : 38] Forgive us for the times that we have offered you empty words or cold rituals and renew us to a sincere love for you. Teach us to guard our hearts diligently that Christ may dwell in us richly and that our lives may bear fruit that pleases you.

Keep us, Lord, from hypocrisy! from apathy! from wandering! And lead us in the way everlasting! For Jesus' we pray.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Yes, Yes Yes