

GUARD YOUR HEART WITH GRATITUDE

Sermon written by Martha-Jean Fitch

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TEXT: Psalm 50:23, Proverbs 4:23, Colossians 2:6-7, Ephesians 5:1-4

How's your heart today? Are you taking good care of your heart – guarding it and protecting it? Are you filling it with the right things?

You know, if you google the phrase “heart health”, over 8 billion sites pop up! Can you believe that? 8 billion. And if you read a few of those articles, you will find that the evidence is pretty clear – what we put into our bodies and what we do, affects the health of our heart. There are all sorts of advice on guarding our hearts from a heart attack like eating the right foods, doing cardio exercises, getting enough rest, and getting regular check-ups. We need to be active in guarding our hearts – which has been described as the epicenter of our health – as it works non-stop to power our circulatory system – spreading nutrients to the cells in our body!¹

While God is certainly concerned about how we care for our physical heart – He is most concerned about the condition of our spiritual hearts. Our heart is the center our spiritual life. God wants us to love Him with all our hearts and our neighbors as ourselves. And He wants us to guard our hearts above all else – for from our hearts flows everything we do.

So, how's your heart? Are your “arteries” clogged from the pain and pressure in life? Is the plaque of bitterness and anger and unconfessed sin causing a blockage of God's love with others? Do you have a spiritual heart murmur – full of grumbling and complaining? Are you getting enough spiritual exercise – or are you just feeding on spiritual “fast food”? If so, perhaps a change in your spiritual diet is just what you need. Hide God's word in your heart and coat your heart in prayer – and guard it with gratitude.

I once read a legend of a man who found the barn where Satan had stored seeds which he planned to sow in the hearts of people. There were bags of seeds variously marked: hatred, fear, doubt, despair, and unforgiveness, pride, greed, etc. The devil appeared and struck up a conversation with the traveler. He gleefully told the traveler how easily the seeds he sowed sprouted in the hearts of men and women. “Are there any hearts in which these seeds will not sprout”, the traveler asked. A sad look appeared on the devil's face. “These seeds will not sprout and the heart of a thankful and joyful person”, he confessed.

As Pastor John Piper puts it – when you practice thanksgiving, you are building a wall of protection around your heart from the deceitfulness of the enemy. Gratitude acts as a guard or protection of your heart.² You intentionally put God's goodness, kindness and faithfulness at the forefront of your mind, which is an incredibly powerful deterrent to those seeds of discontent, discouragement, complaining and unforgiveness.

There are so many blessings and benefits that come into our lives when we make a decision to guard our hearts with gratitude.

We are helped physically. Doctors say that gratitude is the healthiest human emotion. It improves your brain and your physical health. It has been shown that gratitude will change the patterns in the brain that help our health in many ways. Pastor Lane Anderson tells how his heart doctor gave him one word of advice after his heart surgery. He said, “When you wake up each day, think of three things you can be grateful for. It is good for your heart.”² Just counting those blessings rather than counting your pains and complaints, will make you a healthier and stronger person.

God designed our bodies to be physically and mentally helped by gratitude. In Proverbs 17:22, we read “A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a broken spirit saps a person’s strength.” When we focus our minds on our blessings – our hearts are lifted up and can heal – like good medicine. But if our focus is on our problems and pain – filling our hearts with ingratitude, stress and strain, never appreciating what we have – it can crush your bones and break your spirit.

The story is told of a gifted preacher who suffered a nervous breakdown. During one of his periods of extreme anxiety, a friend told him that with the Lord's help he could overcome his depression. The key was to practice Thanksgiving. He suggested that the minister think of all the people who'd had a special influence upon his life over the years. Then he asked, “did you ever thank any of them?” The down hearted man confessed that he couldn't recall ever doing so. His friend challenged him to think of one person and write to him, expressing his appreciation. The pastor took his advice and when he learned that his letter had greatly encouraged the recipient, his heart was lightened. So, he jotted down the names of all those who had helped him. Before exhausting his list, he had written about 500 letters! As he counted his blessings, the cloud of despair began to lift. Realizing that the Savior had been showering him with encouragement through these individuals, his thoughts turned toward heaven. Soon he began blessing God daily for his love and goodness. He not only overcame his sadness but helped 500 others to be cheerful and uplifted.

Gratitude helps us physically, mentally – and also spiritually. Gratitude opens our spiritual eyes! The more we thank God – the more we will see Him. When we complain and grumble and look only at the negative, our eyes are clouded and fail to see God at work. But when we start praising God and thanking Him – our eyes are opened and we begin to see God’s faithfulness and providence and His work in our lives.

Gratitude is truly God’s will for our lives. God wants us to be thankful at all times, not just on the sunny days but also in the dark, difficult times. I Thessalonians 5:18 says, “Give thanks in all circumstances for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” And note, that doesn’t mean we thank God FOR everything that happens to us – but IN everything. Evil does NOT come from God – and thus we shouldn’t be thankful for it. But in the midst of those difficult times, we can still be thankful for God’s presence and for the good He will do to redeem the difficult times. It is God’s will to look to Him and be grateful at all times.

And what is so amazing is that gratitude guards our hearts from emotions like worry, depression and fear – and gives us a supernatural peace. Philippians 4:6-7 says: “Do not be anxious about anything but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present

your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.”

I have experienced this several times in my life. When I have found myself getting really anxious – or angry and frustrated – it doesn’t help for me to keep complaining and fretting and stewing. That only makes me more miserable. But when I start thanking God and praising Him – my heart changes and I am suddenly, amazingly, at peace. It is as if God comes and places His hand on my shoulder and says, “It’s OK – I am going to help you get through this. I am right here.”

Our faith will be deepened and strengthened as we follow Jesus and look for ways to be grateful. Colossians 2:6-7 says, “Let your roots grow down into Him, and let your lives be built on Him. Then your faith will grow strong in the truth you were taught, and you will overflow with thankfulness.” You know someone is growing spiritually when you hear them expressing thankfulness. Instead of complaining and grumbling - their attitude is one that looks for God’s blessings and they are ready to give testimony to God’s work in their lives.

Gratitude will also bring joy and happiness to our lives. The happiest people are those who are the most grateful. Focusing on the good things God has done in your life brings you joy. It has been said that “It is not happy people that are thankful. It is thankful people that are happy.”

John Wesley was about 21 years of age when he went to Oxford University. He came from a Christian home, and he was gifted with a keen mind and good looks. Yet, in those days he was a bit snobbish and sarcastic. One night, however, something happened that set in motion a change in Wesley’s heart. While speaking with a porter, he discovered that the poor fellow had only one coat and lived in such impoverished conditions that he didn’t even have a bed. Yet, he was an unusually happy person, filled with gratitude to God. Wesley, being immature, thoughtlessly joked about the man’s misfortunes. “And what else do you thank God for?” he said with a touch of sarcasm. The porter smiled, and in the spirit of meekness replied with joy, “I thank Him that He has given me a life and being, a heart to love Him, and above all a constant desire to serve Him!” Deeply moved, Wesley recognized that this man knew the meaning of true thankfulness.

Gratitude definitely will improve our relationships as well. Whether it is with a family member, friend, neighbor or co-worker, having an attitude of gratitude will transform those relationships. You’ll have fewer arguments as you grow more thankful for the people in your life.

As John Piper says, “The guardian role of gratitude applies not only to prayer and the spiritual battles we fight there, but also to our daily interaction with people.⁴ We can see this in Ephesians 5:4, reading from the Message Bible: “Though some tongues just love the taste of gossip, those who follow Jesus have better uses for language than that. Don’t talk dirty or silly. That kind of talk doesn’t fit our style. Thanksgiving is our dialect.”

How can we guard ourselves against a mouth that is foul with criticism and bitterness and blaming and ...complaining and sarcasm and disrespect...? How do we improve our relationships? The answer is: Fill your mouth with thanksgiving.

For example, John Piper says: “When a group of people get together and the first people to speak, speak words of gratitude, the conversation seldom degenerates into muck-raking. The group is guarded from sin with gratitude.”⁵

Be the person who says “I appreciate you.” “I thank God for you.” And when people start to complain around you – be the person who looks for the good and shares the blessings. See what a difference that will make in your relationships.

And finally – but certainly not the least – but maybe the most important – gratitude glorifies and honors God. In Psalm 50, we hear God saying that it is not in all of the sacrificing the bulls and goats that honors Him – and it’s not in our going through empty rituals, going through the motions that pleases Him. What God wants us to do is:

*“Make thankfulness your sacrifice to God and keep the vows you made to the Most High. Then call on me when you are in trouble, and I will rescue, and you will give me glory.
Giving thanks is a sacrifice that truly honors me. If you keep to my path, I will reveal to you the salvation of God.”*

As we give thanks more and more to God – it will reach more and more people, and God will be lifted up and receive the glory.

And how do we offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving? I think it takes work – to practice thanksgiving – to choose thanksgiving. As Pastor Andrew Davis says: “You have to stop what you’re doing, focus your mind on the blessings of God, remember them, then order your thoughts and prayers up to God for His many blessings. This takes labor of mind and body, and some people don’t really want to put in that labor.

Secondly, set aside a set time to do this. Daily, in quiet times, thankfulness for God’s rich blessings should be a central part of your morning habits. Fill your minds with His many blessings—physical and spiritual, temporal and eternal. Use the Scriptures to express your thanks to God. Pour out your heart in prayer to Him.” That will honor and glorify Him.

So, as I close, I have a challenge for you. From now, until Christmas, I want to encourage you to write down each day what you are grateful for. Write it on a piece of paper or in your phone or computer. Write down at least one thing – or several things. Really, the more things you write down, the greater your sense of well-being and joy you will find. Gratitude is a habit you have to train your heart to do each and every day, in all circumstances. By writing down what you are grateful for, you are opening your eyes to God’s blessings all around you. The hope and the prayer is that by doing this exercise, your gratitude will just become part of your lifestyle. You will fill your heart with joy and gratitude – and release the power of God’s goodness into your heart like never before.

PRAYER

Lord, teach us to offer you a heart of thanksgiving and praise in all the daily experiences of life. Teach us to be joyful always, to pray continually and to give thanks in all our circumstances. We long to bring pleasure to Your heart daily. Break the power of the enemy in our lives. Defeat Him through our sacrifice of praise. Change our outlook and attitude into one of joyful contentment with our present circumstances.

Convict us whenever we complain or compare ourselves with others. Give us Your attitude of humility and thankful acceptance.

Oh God, we long to bring a smile to Your face. Teach us the power of a thankful heart. For Your truth dwells in a thankful heart.

Move in us God – guard our hearts with gratitude, we pray - In Jesus' name, amen.

INVITATION

RESOURCES

¹American Heart Association, “*Study: Gratitude is a Healthy Attitude*”
<https://news.heart.org/study-gratitude-is-a-healthy-attitude/>

²John Piper, “*Guard Yourself with Gratitude*”, <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/guard-yourself-with-gratitude#:~:text=Romans%201%3A21%20in%20Agreement&text=Gratitude%20is%20the%20guardian%20of,Guard%20yourself%20with%20gratitude!>

³Pastor Lane Skoglund-Anderson, “*The Renewed Mind*”.

⁴IBID., John Piper.