



THE
MENTORING
PROJECT

GUARDING YOUR
HEART: PROTECTING
YOUR SOUL IN A
TEMPTING WORLD



TODD SMELTZER

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	4
PART I: INCLINE YOUR EAR.....	6
PART II: STORE IN YOUR HEART.....	11
PART III: GUARD YOUR MOUTH.....	15
PART IV: GUARD YOUR EYES.....	20
PART V: PONDER YOUR PATH.....	24
CONCLUSION.....	28
END NOTES.....	30

**GUARDING YOUR HEART:
PROTECTING YOUR SOUL IN A TEMPTING WORLD**



INTRODUCTION

“Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life.” –
Proverbs 4:23

The concept of securing the perimeter can be found in several aspects of life. History reveals examples like walls, fortresses, and trenches that have been used to help protect those on the inside against threats from the outside. These structures of the past served as a defense from intruders or invaders coming with harmful intent. Disregarding them would leave people unsafe and vulnerable. This physical safety is often the starting point for understanding protection from evil in other realms of our existence.

From the perspective of the military or law enforcement, creating a secured area allows for operations to continue, while potential interruptions are mitigated. Picture a country’s armed forces going into a dangerous territory and immediately setting up protection around them as they seek to move to the next phase of their plan. We can also picture a similar defense after an act of violence is committed, and a perimeter is quickly put in place to contain a threat and minimize any further damage. This discipline is essential for spiritual maturity, as it teaches us that we cannot make progress without first securing our current position.

We have come to expect security around buildings and premises. Cameras, gates, and, in certain places, guards help to ensure only those who have authorization to enter are able to do so. For personal residences, doorbells have been upgraded with cameras recording anything that moves in front of a house. It seems as if there’s no end to the lengths we will go to guard our property and possessions. No matter how many times that stray animal or delivery person triggers a notification, it still brings finding peace in chaos to know we can see what’s happening.

FIELD GUIDE

What dangers exist around us is not something we want to dwell on, yet we recognize it's not wise to dismiss proper security, especially as the list of possible threats continues to grow. We have not even touched on cyber security and the endless ways technology is being leveraged to inflict harm toward others.

And the necessity to guard what can be compromised grows with the value that is placed on what is being secured. It's one thing for surveillance to watch over a building or a digital platform, it's a whole other territory when lives are involved. The same thing is true of us individually. What we allow to enter our hearts and minds can have devastating effects. Thus, given the endless supply of dangers, we must ask the question: what does the Bible say about guarding your heart, and "how can we better protect our souls in a world that is so full of temptations?"

Thankfully God's Word does not leave us in the dark about what it looks like to protect ourselves from spiritual danger. This field guide will use Proverbs 4:20-27 as a framework to survey the primary ways the Lord teaches us guarding your heart. These words of wisdom from Solomon provide a multi-faceted approach to securing a perimeter around our souls that deters threats and welcomes truth. This is not just a concept for advanced theologians; it is a vital part of Bible study for beginners who want to understand why is guarding your heart the key to spiritual growth.

By establishing the importance of spiritual boundaries in a tempting world, we can begin the work of resisting the devil and ensuring the purity of heart that Christ desires for His followers.

**GUARDING YOUR HEART:
PROTECTING YOUR SOUL IN A TEMPTING WORLD**

1

INCLINE YOUR EAR

*“My son, be attentive to my words; incline your ear to my sayings.” –
Proverbs 4:20*

The meaning of the word “incline” may not immediately register with you. The word simply means to stretch out, spread out, extend, or bend your ear to receive what is being shared. What should we be inclined to hear? God’s words. The words which Solomon will share are from the Creator of the Universe. Yet, we all recognize there are plenty of ways our ear can be bent in other directions.

Do You Find It Hard to Focus?

The world is full of distractions. I am often distracted by text messages, emails, and phone calls. It seems as if there is a constant tug of war going on within us as all kinds of things vie for our attention. Even when every precaution has been taken to help us maintain focus, another competing thought or distraction is ready to take over in a split second. The overcoming temptation process comes in all shapes and sizes, and from every direction imaginable.

The barrage of thoughts that can take away our focus is formidable, even overwhelming at times. It not only includes temptations to sin, but also many other thoughts that can keep us lost in our minds. It can be a frightful exercise to retrace our thoughts to figure out how we got to whatever has currently captured our attention. This thought leads to that thought, which brings up that past experience, or this consideration for the future.

As our focus shifts from one thing to the next the level of complexity grows. Our emotions are affected, which triggers our will to do something about this change in feelings. This is why inner healing is so necessary; our past wounds often dictate our present distractions. Then you throw in recent interactions with other people and all bets are off. Before you know it your time in God’s Word with your favorite cup of coffee is invaded by

FIELD GUIDE

frustrations over a comment from someone the day before. How in the world did you become distracted by that when you were in the middle of your quiet time?

The list of causes seems to be endless. Now, the reality is that each of our minds work differently. We have all trained our minds to shift from one thing to the next. Amid the distractions, we also must recognize that we are in the midst of a spiritual battle. There is no way for us to know what all is being aimed at us, to knock us off course or to distract us from a consistent focus on Jesus.

One of the images that comes to my mind periodically is the “flaming darts of the evil one” that we need the shield of faith to extinguish (Ephesians 6:16). The shape which “flaming darts” take are many. It can come as a feeling of deep frustration or shame over a recent conversation with your spouse which did not go as you expected. This is why learning how to guard your heart in a relationship according to the Bible is vital for maintaining peace. It could be an interaction with one of your kids that you keep mulling over and wondering how things could have turned out better. There may be an unresolved issue with someone from church or work that has been difficult to stop thinking about.

So, we bring our plight before Almighty God and plead for His ear and His grace to impact our focus. As David says in Psalm 86:1-6, “Incline your ear, O Lord, and answer me, for I am poor and needy. Preserve my life, for I am godly; save your servant, who trusts in you – you are my God. Be gracious to me, O Lord, for to you do I cry all the day. Gladden the soul of your servant, for to you, O Lord, do I lift up my soul. For you, O Lord, are good and forgiving, abounding in steadfast love to all who call upon you. Give ear, O Lord, to my prayer; listen to my plea for grace.”

What Has Your Attention?

In his book, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, Donald Whitney says, “And in my own pastoral and personal Christian experience, I can say that I’ve never known a man or woman who came to spiritual maturity except through discipline. Godliness comes through discipline.”¹

One of the main Scriptures highlighted in the book is “train yourself for godliness; for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value

GUARDING YOUR HEART: PROTECTING YOUR SOUL IN A TEMPTING WORLD

in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come” (1 Timothy 4:7b-8). Yet, we fully realize training and disciplining ourselves will not happen naturally as even the desire to do so must come from the Lord.

One of the guys I have met with for discipleship expressed surprise at how I wanted to go about our meetings. He started with an openness to meet weekly for reading and discussing the Bible, along with praying for the Lord to lead us in applying his Word to our lives. However, after taking some time to get to know one another he readily admitted he tended to be all over the place, moving from one task or situation to another rather quickly. As a single dad, small business owner, and someone whose attention typically jumped around, consistent Bible reading and prayer had always been a struggle.

Our initial attempts at some type of structure for our time together began with him saying, “Well, just so you know, I’ve never been able to follow a Bible reading plan or stay consistent in reading and praying.” This is a common hurdle in Bible study for beginners. I challenged him to just try and find one thing from God’s Word to bring to our discussion each week.

A few weeks of meeting went by and, interestingly enough, he had had something to share every time. After more time transpired, my friend became struck at just how relevant God’s Word was to his life.

Do you currently feel like my friend felt at the beginning of our meeting together to study God’s Word? Does it seem like you are simply too distracted to give time to God’s Word and prayer? Let me encourage you to consider inviting someone into your life to help you grow more consistent in reading and praying. Maybe choose a strategy like me and my friend chose where you meet weekly to discuss one observation from God’s Word that stood out to you that week. This is one of the practical ways to protect your soul from worldly temptations: by surrounding yourself with accountability. You may even begin by committing to one fifteen-minute phone call per week where all you do is share prayer requests and pray together. Start small and grow as you go.

FIELD GUIDE

Who are You Listening to?

The sheer number of voices that seek influence over us is staggering. They come from countless directions and can be called upon instantly any day or hour via mediums such as social media. And there is the potential with any of them to either stoke or dampen our affections for the Lord. Jonathan Edwards once observed that the Christian's joy is twofold: first, it comes from the "from the view of Christ's excellency, and the excellency of His grace and the beauty of the way of salvation in Him." Secondly, the Christian's joy springs from the fact that "so excellent a Saviour and such excellent grace are theirs."²

Is this your joy today? Joy in Christ and over the fact that he is yours by faith? If not, how have distractions from other "influencers" choked out your joy in Christ? Following Jesus isn't just about focusing on him but also delighting in him. When we are distracted, our delight is often diminished. This is why Christian mindfulness—keeping our awareness fixed on God's presence—is so important.

Here's how Kris Lundgaard in his book, *The Enemy Within*, describes this challenge: "When the mind wants to know God, the flesh imposes ignorance, darkness, error, and trivial thoughts. The will can't move toward God without feeling the weight of stubbornness holding it back. And the affections, longing to long for God, are constantly fighting the infection of sensuality or the disease of indifference."³

Is it any wonder why the apostle Paul speaks of "taking every thought captive to obey Christ," given the kind of warfare each of us faces (2 Corinthians 10:5)? How grateful we should be that our Good Shepherd, "came to give us life and life abundantly" as we "hear His voice, trusting He knows us, so we can follow Him" despite what opposes us (John 10:10, 27). This is at the heart of Biblical principles for guarding your heart from negative influences.

Our need for being discerning with who we listen to is compounded as we factor in family relationships and other people we regularly communicate with. It takes wisdom from the Lord to know who we should allow to speak into our lives. We also need wisdom to know discern who God has brought into our life in order that we may speak into theirs.

**GUARDING YOUR HEART:
PROTECTING YOUR SOUL IN A TEMPTING WORLD**

The threats come from near and far. If you were to make a list of all the voices you regularly consume through videos, podcasts, books, and social media, how would you rate the degree of influence each has on you? Even if you only have it on for background noise or to pass the time while you're driving, add them to the list in order to get a full scope of your typical diet. Do these influences help you love Jesus more or do they distract you from him? This is one of the Bible verses about protecting your heart and thoughts in action. That may be a good question to ask the person you're going through this Field Guide with.

Discussion & Reflection:

1. In what ways do you find it hard to focus? What impact does this have on inclining your ear to the Lord?
2. Is there anything you are giving your attention to that you need to reconsider? Is there anything that has been particularly edifying to which you need to give more attention?
3. How is who you are listening to an encouragement toward greater Christlikeness?

2

STORE IN YOUR HEART

“Let them not escape from your sight; keep them within your heart. For they are life to those who find them, and healing to all their flesh.” –

Proverbs 4:21-22

The Scriptures paint a picture of our hearts as a repository where many different things can be kept. Even things that can be diametrically at odds can be housed and allowed to affect us in contrasting ways. In this section, we will look at a few of the descriptions of the heart from God’s Word and how they impact how we guard it. This is an essential component of guarding your heart effectively.

The Tablet of Your Heart

Aside from the digital use of the word tablet, biblically speaking the word reminds us of the Ten Commandments that were given to Moses. Exodus 24:12 says, “The Lord said to Moses, “Come up to me on the mountain and wait there, that I may give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction.” These commands that were written with the very finger of God were to be obeyed and followed by God’s people. God’s people were not to forget his Word to them but instead keep what they had been told.

Solomon picks up on this imagery in Proverbs 3:3 when he says, “Let not steadfast love and faithfulness forsake you; bind them around your neck; write them on the tablet of your heart.” He reiterates it again in Proverbs 7:2-3, “keep my commandments and live; keep my teaching as the apple of your eye; bind them on your fingers; write them on the tablet of your heart.” In doing so, Israel would ensure that what God said would always be with them.

GUARDING YOUR HEART: PROTECTING YOUR SOUL IN A TEMPTING WORLD

However, we also learn over and over from Israel's example that just God's Word being with them did not guarantee they would do what was right. In fact, the Lord establishes an entire sacrificial system to cover over the countless ways his people strayed from his Word. Though they had God's Word, their hearts were made of stone.

That's where God's miraculous promise comes into play. In Ezekiel 36:26-27, God told his people, "And I will give you a new heart and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules." These words strike at the heart of the gospel as Jesus resolutely heads to the cross as the final sacrifice to pay for our sins. In doing so, the Father promises to send the Holy Spirit to dwell within every Christian, making their hearts of flesh— hearts which have God's Word written on them. This internal transformation is the bedrock of inner healing.

In his book, *The Rule of Love*, Jonathan Leeman explains the miraculous difference this transformation makes. He writes, "Apart from God's Spirit, of course, God's law does not have the power to change us. Yet, by God's Spirit, loving God means loving his law, since it expresses his character, And such love, by the power of God's Spirit, becomes generative in our lives. We grow and expand and become larger as we begin to mimic God. We internalize God's way of being, God's nature, God's rule, his character. As such, we then become like that fruitful tree, blessing those around us."⁴

The Treasure of Your Heart

Another description of our hearts that can double as both the action of gathering, and the object stored away is the treasure found within. The word treasure is also used in conjunction with what you and I pile up either here on earth or in heaven. As one of many facets of Jesus' teaching on the Sermon on the Mount he instructs the crowd to "lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal (Matthew 6:20)." Then, he draws a correlation between where our treasure is stored and where our heart's affections lie. This is a primary lesson for spiritual maturity.

FIELD GUIDE

So, let's consider where our treasures are stored. Consider that which you've been laboring for all piled up in one location. Now ask yourself: are your piles more suited for heaven or earth? Are your treasures spiritual (i.e., growth in grace and godliness) or temporal (material)? What do the piles look like in proportion to one another? As you seek to guard your heart, you should want your heavenly treasure pile to grow such that it significantly outsizes whatever worldly gains you attain. This is one of the practical ways to protect your soul from worldly temptations.

Not only do we have ample space for storage outside us, there is also a deep well within us that affects our outward actions. Solomon writes:

My son, if you receive my words and treasure up my commandments with you, making your ear attentive to wisdom and inclining your heart to understanding; yes, if you call out for insight and raise your voice for understanding, if you seek it like silver and search for it as for hidden treasures, then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God. For the Lord gives wisdom from his mouth come knowledge and understanding; he stores up sound wisdom for the upright (Proverbs 2:1-7a).

What does it look like to store up within according to Solomon?

1. Receive God's Word
2. Listen for wisdom and understanding
3. Ask for insight and understanding
4. Seek it like silver and search for it as hidden treasure
5. For the Lord gives and stores up sound wisdom for his children

May this be our prayer today, "Heavenly Father, thank you for being a generous God who stores up wisdom for his children. Forgive us for not seeking it with all diligence. Help us to listen and ask for insight and understanding with greater conviction and desire. In Jesus Name, Amen."

The Desires of Your Heart

Years ago, one of the men I was investing in was facing the loss of his mom at a relatively young age. It caused him to reevaluate how he had followed Christ to that point in his life. He knew the Lord and was a faithful member

GUARDING YOUR HEART: PROTECTING YOUR SOUL IN A TEMPTING WORLD

of our church. However, he sensed his desires shifting from what he historically found himself longing for. The more time we spent in the Scriptures together the more our conversations began to change.

Early on he thought he had gone far enough spiritually. After all, his commitment to read and pray and discuss the Word seemed like plenty. However, as our time together wore on, there was one dialogue among several others that was particularly memorable. In it he recounted how he used to think in terms of himself having given the Lord what he needed to in order to be faithful to Him.

Yet, as God's Word increasingly penetrated his heart and the Spirit used our time together to help each of us grow in Christ, what he wanted out of life was clearly changing. The days of a more transactional relationship with the Lord were waning. And thoughts of going further with him were no longer viewed as too great an expectation. Instead, slowly over time the desires of his heart were being changed. He wanted more and more pleasure in God. This is the result of a consistent focus on Jesus.

It was a real-life example of John 15:7-8 being lived out. "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples." As he abided in the Lord and God's Word abided in him more richly, the desires of his heart were shifting. This was indeed worth rejoicing over as we also witnessed Paul's words coming to pass as well. "And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:7)." This is how we learn how to guard your heart from bitterness and emotional hurt: by replacing those negative roots with a desire for God.

What's stored in our hearts has a direct impact on our daily lives both now and for eternity. May our days be more filled with following his desires and not our own.

Discussion & Reflection:

1. What is the Lord writing on the tablet of your heart currently?
2. Which aspect of Psalm 2:1-7a are you most in need of seeing growth? And why?
3. How has abiding in Christ impacted the desires of your heart?

3

GUARD YOUR MOUTH

“Put away from you crooked speech and put devious talk far from you.”
– Proverbs 4:24

When was the last time you said something and as soon as the words left your mouth you were immediately looking for ways to shove them back in? Maybe it was a sarcastic comment that came out with quite a bit more edge and bite to it than you anticipated. Possibly there was a hard conversation you were putting off that resulted in underlying tension that came out sideways and made matters worse. Or maybe you’re like me and sometimes speak carelessly instead of carefully. How can we grow in speaking God’s words to our delight instead of speaking our words to our regret?

What You Say

If there was one part of this field guide that we are more susceptible to thinking we can control solely with more intentional effort speech is probably it. I mean how hard can it be to follow our parents’ advice, “If you don’t have anything nice to say, don’t say it.” Well, as we’ve all realized, it’s harder than we originally thought.

On the surface it appears so easy to abide by the apostle Paul’s instructions. “Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear (Ephesians 4:29).” Got it. Say what’s good for building others up. Don’t say what can corrupt. Simply as that.

Yet, we’ve all been there when simply trying harder wasn’t enough. Crooked speech still slips out. As one man I know lamented, “My mouth

GUARDING YOUR HEART: PROTECTING YOUR SOUL IN A TEMPTING WORLD

gets me into more trouble than practically all my other body parts combined.”

This is where we recognize that all the moralistic actions we can muster to secure a solid perimeter around our heart will not cut it. So, we back up to consider the gospel as the foundation from which Paul calls us to obey such commands. Here’s part of his prayers for the Ephesian church:

“Having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places (Ephesians 1:18-20).”

The immeasurable greatness of God’s power, the same great might that raised Jesus from the dead, resides within every believer to accomplish his will and work through their lives. This includes praying for God’s wisdom and strength for what you and I are to say to build others up and not to tear others down.

How You Say It

If only we could move on from guarding our mouth and call it a day. Unfortunately, it may have only taken the subheading above to remind us of another classic platitude lingering in the back of our minds. “It’s not what you say, it’s how you say it.”

How different life would be if this described our natural disposition: “The heart of the wise makes his speech judicious and adds persuasiveness to his lips. Gracious words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the body (Proverbs 16:23-24).”

Yet, even when we don’t mean to, how we talk to others can resemble these much tougher words. “There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts,” instead of the corresponding, “but the tongue of the wise brings healing (Proverbs 12:18).”

It reminds me of a marriage workshop my wife and I attended. The wellknown speaker was illustrating his point with a recent interaction that

FIELD GUIDE

had transpired between him and his wife. Her feedback to him was on how he had shared his comments during the conversation in question.

At first, he wasn't coming close to realizing how she perceived him in his comments. So, he wanted some audience participation to illustrate the discrepancy. At that point he began to roleplay their dialogue and when he got to the comments that were being refuted, he asked for our input on how his tone seemed to us.

The second he tried to use the same tone he had used with her, everyone in attendance let out a collective gasp at the intensity of his words. Then, with considerable humility he shared how eye opening this was for him in not recognizing how he was coming across to his beloved bride.

How often are our intentions with our words lost because of our tone? Have you said something in the wrong way and caused grief to your spouse, kids, extended family, co-workers, friends, and neighbors? May the Lord give each of us greater insight into the intent and impact of our words so that we can build up rather than tear down.

When You Say It

On which end of the continuum do you tend to lean given the following extremes: being way too passive and waiting too long to say what needs said? Do you almost never speak up or do you regularly jump the gun and blurting words out prematurely?

Knowing your tendencies is something helpful to discuss with others for encouragement and feedback. On one end we can see the invaluable wisdom from James 1:19-20, "Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger, for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God." Speaking too quickly can be a sign of anger, as well as selfishness, lack of self-control, or too little compassion for the one to whom we are speaking.

On the other hand, Proverbs 25:11 says, "A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver." This wise saying highlights the value and impact of words spoken at the right time and in the right way.

What practical steps would the Lord have you take to speak the right thing at the right time? Is it exercising greater assertiveness as you ask him for

GUARDING YOUR HEART: PROTECTING YOUR SOUL IN A TEMPTING WORLD

boldness, courage, and confidence in Christ to speak up when the Spirit leads you to? Or is it exhibiting increased patience and love for the person to whom you are speaking; praying for the Spirit's help in being quick to listen and slow to speak as you improve in allowing others to talk before you? Whichever it is for you, may the Lord continue his great work within you as He molds and shapes you more and more into the image of Christ.

To Whom Do You Say It

Can you believe how hard it is at times to avoid gossip? If you're like me, it can be so tempting to tell other people things that really, they shouldn't know, and I definitely shouldn't say.

And we can be so resourceful in coming up with a myriad of reasons why this person must be told what we know. It can be couched in terms of our need to vent, or our need for moral support and encouragement. We can even justify gossip by hiding it under the guise of prayer when the real reason is much less honorable.

The Scriptures are replete with warnings regarding the power of the tongue and with strong commands against unwholesome speech. Yet, the temptation of gossip or slander can simply overcome us periodically. It's in those moments that we recognize that it's true, "The words of a whisperer are like delicious morsels; they go down to the inner parts of the body (Proverbs 18:8.)"

We also realize that no matter how hard we try we, in our own strength we are powerless to control our tongues. "But no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so (James 3:8-10)."

As a result, let's face it, none of us walks this out perfectly before the Lord. So, how do we grow in wisdom and strength in this area of our lives? Here are three ways to consider:

1. Seek the good of others. Pray before you speak. Ask for the Lord's insight into whether what you're about to say or to whom you're about to say it will be for their good.

FIELD GUIDE

2. Ask, "Can the person help?" I remember a mentor of mine asking me, "Can the person you are considering speaking with do anything about the situation?" That question stopped me dead in my tracks. In that situation the answer was no. And keeping the question in mind has proved to be helpful on several other occasions since then.
3. Consider your motivations. As James 3:13-18 describes, is the wisdom I am seeking from another born out of desiring wisdom from above or from below? Does it come from jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart or from the Spirit's leading toward being impartial and sincere and seeking peace?

Discussion & Reflection:

1. How are you most in need of asking for the Lord's help in watching what you say?
2. Are you more soft spoken or loud? How do you need to lean into this to better communicate with others?
3. How does being intentional about guarding your mouth impact when you say things?
4. In what way are you most in need of watching to whom you say things?

**GUARDING YOUR HEART:
PROTECTING YOUR SOUL IN A TEMPTING WORLD**

4

GUARD YOUR EYES

“Let your eyes look directly forward, and your gaze be straight before you.” – Proverbs 4:25

Well, I’m guessing you knew it was coming eventually. Any discussion about guarding your heart in a tempting world would have to address our eyes at some point. So, let’s forge ahead together, knowing when it comes to overcoming temptation this is an area in which we all struggle in various ways and to varying degrees.

Looking Back

We must first recognize that looking back is not all bad. Harkening back to the introduction, when it comes to setting a perimeter for security and protection from evil it would be foolish to not keep a constant look out behind us. There is also a consistent theme throughout the Scriptures to remember what God has done in the past. As Psalm 143:5 says, “I remember the days of old; I meditate on all that you have done; I ponder the work of your hands.”

And yet, one temptation is to look back at days gone by and see them through rose colored glasses. Have you ever caught yourself thinking life would be better if you could go back there and recreate those days? “Now the rabble that was among them had a strong craving. And the people of Israel also wept again and said, “Oh that we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost us nothing... But now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at (Numbers 11:4-5).” Never mind the fact they were in bondage and God was faithfully providing for them daily as Moses led them to the promised land. This is why how to guard your heart from bitterness and emotional hurt often starts with choosing gratitude over nostalgia for “the good old days” that were actually seasons of bondage.

FIELD GUIDE

Another source of enticement in letting our eyes gaze into the past is with a longing for relationships that we have enjoyed previously. This can include more overtly sinful steps such as searching for a high school sweetheart that we are curious about even though we are married. It may also look like comparing old friends with current ones to the point of becoming discontent with who God has put in your life in this season. Learning how to guard your heart in a relationship according to the Bible requires us to be present and faithful to the people God has placed in our lives today.

Maintaining relationships with friends and brothers and sisters in Christ from prior days can be fruitful. However, if that's where we stay it can also be harmful. How? Well, for one, looking back can keep us from helping other people grow in Christ now and looking for opportunities the Lord is giving us to mentor others in the future. In talking with a guy about discipleship recently, he lamented the fact that all his friends were still from high school. And now that he was in his forties, it was painfully obvious that he had not engaged as a meaningful member of his local church since then. Such stagnation is a hurdle to spiritual maturity.

Looking back can seem beneficial and healthy, but if it keeps you and I from having an eye to make disciples now and into the future it will be eternally costly.

Looking Around

Like looking back is important, so is looking around. The reason looking around matters is because threats surround us. In our main passage from Proverbs, Solomon's instructions involve the path of the righteous (Proverbs 4:18) contrasted with the way of the wicked (Proverbs 4:19). One is compared to the light of dawn and the other like deep darkness. One is set out straight before us and the other takes us down alternative paths.

And as we know from learning to ride a bike or drive a car, wherever our eyes are looking is the direction we will start traveling. This can be a positive when we are seeking to be used by the Lord in different places or in the lives of different people. But if it's simply to look around without intention of guarding your heart, there are countless other things that can catch our eye. The physical world around us and the online world that's

GUARDING YOUR HEART: PROTECTING YOUR SOUL IN A TEMPTING WORLD

always available to us provide unlimited spiritual dangers. We are predisposed as sinful beings to desire that which is dangerous. For James 1:14-15 says, “But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.” This is why Christian mindfulness is essential; we must be aware of what we are inviting into our souls through our eyes.

Years ago, I was witnessing to a friend of mine. His name was Steve, and he ran a small family manufacturing business. Our conversations covered a range of topics from business, to his family, and various spiritual questions he would bring up for us to discuss. Over time our relationship grew to the point that he wanted to talk about certain challenges he was facing. One of the primary struggles that haunted him was a long battle he fought with an addiction to pornography.

He desperately wanted to be free of the control and influence it had in his life and yet he felt powerless to resist the grip it had on him. During one of our talks, he made a comment that has stuck with me years later. He said, “I don’t fully understand why I keep going back to something I know full well is so destructive. However, I can tell you is this... I have done this long enough to know that when I sit down in front of my computer and click on things that I know are wrong, I can physically sense the presence of evil behind the screen.”

Are you caught in something you know to be evil? If so, confess that to the Lord. Tell your mentor. Ask for accountability. By God’s grace, the bondage you experience can be broken because of what Jesus accomplished on Calvary. Resisting the devil starts with bringing these hidden things into the light.

Looking Forward

So, how do we fortify our defense forces in the area of vision? First, let us all be reminded of how susceptible we are to fall to what we see. Jesus said in Luke 11:34-36:

Your eye is the lamp of your body. When your eye is healthy, your whole body is full of light, but when it is bad, your body is full of darkness. Therefore be careful lest the light in you be darkness.

FIELD GUIDE

If then your whole body is full of light, having no part dark, it will be wholly bright, as when a lamp with its rays gives you light.

Second, assess how careful you've been to guard your vision lately. Are there any ways you have been lax in protecting the lamp of your body? Has darkness commandeered any parts of your heart? This is a great topic for a Bible study for beginners or advanced believers alike, as it gets to the root of our daily walk.

Third, pray specifically for the Lord to guide and guard your eyes. "Turn my eyes from looking at worthless things; and give me life in your ways (Psalm 119:37)." This is one of the Bible verses about protecting your heart and thoughts that we should memorize.

Fourth, open the door for confession, repentance, and strength with a key person or people the Lord has brought into your life for mutual support and encouragement. This is one of the practical ways to protect your soul from worldly temptations.

Although conversations about guarding your heart can be awkward and uncomfortable, being reminded that you are not in this battle alone is more than worth it. Maintaining a constant focus on Jesus is the best way to ensure that your path remains in the light. If this is an area of your life that you and your mentor already discuss periodically, praise God. If not, make a point to bring it up soon knowing you have much to gain by doing so.

Discussion & Reflection:

1. How are you tempted to look back in unhealthy ways?
2. How can you be praying for one another when it comes to the temptation of looking around?
3. What has the Lord put before you to look directly forward to? How can you encourage one another in doing so?

**GUARDING YOUR HEART:
PROTECTING YOUR SOUL IN A TEMPTING WORLD**

5

PONDER YOUR PATH

“Ponder the path of your feet; then all your ways will be sure. Do not swerve to the right or to the left; turn your foot away from evil.” –

Proverbs 4:26-27

I'll never forget when Chris approached me over twenty years ago about taking some extended time with the Lord. We had been meeting to help each other grow in Christ and that had been fruitful. However, he had recently ran across the idea of spending unrushed time with Jesus. It could be a few hours, half a day, or an overnight stay somewhere.

Both of us had regular times in His Word and were in prayer most mornings, but this was different. We wondered what it would be like to go for a hike in the woods with just our Bibles, a journal, and a pen, away from our normal everyday distractions. So, we made plans to get away for a night to have extra time with Him and to talk about how He was at work in our lives.

That was the start of a practice that I have kept up a time or two each year, especially when I am pondering the path that I have been traveling with the Lord. Most often it's a few hours or so at a park somewhere outside my normal routine. Sometimes I've gone with a big question that I've been wrestling with, and other times it's been for a general time of refreshing.

I can honestly say the Lord has been so incredibly kind and faithful each time to speak through His Word in clarifying ways. The Lord has many times kept me from swerving to the right or left as He has guided my steps. If you've never taken unhurried time with Him, I'd recommend putting a date on the calendar now to do so on your own or with others.

Rocky Paths

We've all been there when life is not going as we had envisioned. Whether it's the result of an unexpected trial or because of our own unrighteous

FIELD GUIDE

inclinations, rocky paths are treacherous. In those moments or seasons it's important to be honest about how you got there if it's of your own doing. If it's due to another's doing or simply the result of being in the fallen world, it's also vitally important to be honest. Resisting the urge to keep things to yourself and to go it alone with just you and the Lord is paramount.

If guarding our hearts with all vigilance truly is what we are pleading with the Lord to help us strive toward, then it stands to reason that we would use every available means that He has afforded us. This includes the key people He has brought into our lives. The short list could include our spouse, family, those we have a discipling relationship with, or other fellow church members.

Given the brothers and sisters in Christ around you currently, would you say you have a well-fortified spiritual support network of people that you're able to share openly with about the rocks in your path? If so, praise God. If not, in what way is it in need of being strengthened?

Or is there a sense that you could tap into the existing relationships He has provided in more intentional ways? If this is the case, who is the Lord leading you to be more honest with today? Is there anything you have been reluctant to share out of fear or embarrassment?

If so, may the coming days be a time when you recognize the rocky path for what it is... a tough road that can cause us to stumble. And may we be the best stewards of who the Lord has brought or will bring into our lives that He can use to help guide and direct our steps.

Winding Paths

Wouldn't we all love to think that if we pray and apply God's Word to our lives that our path throughout life will be straight and well-marked? However, it doesn't take long for us to realize that isn't the case. There was one conversation among many that I had with my dad when I was wrestling with what direction the Lord was leading me in after high school. He proceeded to tell me that he had been working for a few decades at that point and he still wondered about the path he had taken.

Looking back, I wish that conversation along with the others would have translated into being more content where the Lord had me. Instead,

GUARDING YOUR HEART: PROTECTING YOUR SOUL IN A TEMPTING WORLD

restlessness and discontent ruled the day often in my life. Any situation or season that felt like I was spinning my wheels was difficult to stomach. It seemed as if being like the apostle Paul who learned to be content in whatever situation he faced was an impossibility for me (Phil. 4:11).

It wasn't until after the birth of our first child that the Lord finally got my attention about making the most of the opportunities He had given me to glorify Him. Up to that point I shudder to think of how many chances to minister to people I let pass by, choosing instead to focus on uncertainty about where I was and where the Lord was guiding. It came from a heart that was looking inward and certainly not one that had an outward bent to recognize and respond to people right in front of me who needed the gospel.

Another result of what I perceived to be the winding path was being arrogant in thinking I knew better than the Lord regarding how long I was meant to in this place or that. Entertaining such questions can't help but tempt us to veer off into other directions.

Oh, to have heeded these words in a more faithful way from Deuteronomy 5:32-33, "You shall be careful therefore to do as the Lord your God has commanded you. You shall not turn aside to the right hand or to the left. You shall walk in all the way that the Lord your God has commanded you, that you may live, and that it may go well with you, and that you may live long in the land that you shall possess."

May the Lord give each of us greater contentment and conviction about where in His kingdom He has us serving Him by loving and leading others to Him.

Level Paths

There is so much to the path you and I are on, how little of it we must know. Psalm 25:4-5 is a wonderful Scripture to pray along these lines. "Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all the day long." In doing so, it comes with a recognition that what we perceive as level paths will not be the same as what the Lord sees as level for us.

FIELD GUIDE

All it takes is leafing through the book of 2 Corinthians, especially Paul's list of sufferings in chapter 11 to see that level in God's economy is certainly not pain free and easy. There is clearly a relationship between suffering and the power of the Spirit in Paul's life. Therefore, no matter what our path may look like on the surface to us and others, there is much more going on than we realize as we seek to be obedient to Him.

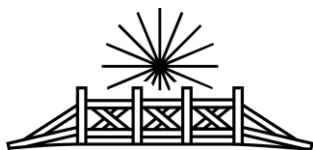
"But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us (2 Corinthians 4:7)." The ESV Study Bible's introduction to this letter highlights the emphasis of "the relationship between suffering and power of the Spirit in Paul's apostolic life, ministry, and message."⁵ The same is true for our lives, though it often won't appear that way in our temporal world. Instead, it will take a much longer view. In fact, Paul stretches the path were on into eternity, to give us the proper perspective (2 Corinthians 4:16-18).

So, what has been your mindset recently as you have pondered your path? What have you sensed from those you've given permission to speak into your life? How has your perspective changed to realize more about why the Lord may have you right where He wants you as you continue following Him?

Discussion & Reflection:

1. What rocks have you found in your path toward guarding your heart recently?
2. How are you susceptible to veering to the left or right when it comes to following Christ?
3. In what ways do you need to thank the Lord yet again for making your path level?

**GUARDING YOUR HEART:
PROTECTING YOUR SOUL IN A TEMPTING WORLD**



CONCLUSION

“My son, be attentive to my words; incline your ear to my sayings. Let them not escape from your sight; keep them within your heart. For they are life to those who find them and healing to all their flesh. Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life. Put away from you crooked speech, and put devious talk far from you. Let your eyes look directly forward, and your gaze be straight before you. Ponder the path of your feet; then all your ways will be sure. Do not swerve to the right or to the left; turn your foot away from evil.” (Proverbs 4:20-27)

As we have witnessed, guarding your heart with all vigilance is a supremely worthwhile endeavor, especially given that springs of life flow from it. Yet, there are plenty of no-brainer endeavors in life that we pass on pursuing, electing for the easier or more pleasurable way.

Another reason for doing so is wrapped up in the word vigilance. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary it is defined as, “the state of being constantly attentive and responsive to signs of opportunity, activity, or danger.”⁶ Hence, the vital life giving and preserving need for setting a secure perimeter around our hearts.

Likewise, imagine if we instructed our immediate family and our spiritual sons and daughters in the faith through our local church as Solomon does for his proverbial son. And imagine if by God’s grace through faith they heed these words of wisdom and pass them on to others. How much more would our collective souls be protected in this relentlessly tempting world? How much healthier would our churches be in protecting and proclaiming the gospel?

What steps is the Lord leading you to take to better secure the perimeter around your heart? In which area are you most vulnerable currently: inclining your ear, storing eternal treasure in your heart, guarding your mouth, guarding your eyes, or pondering your path? How can you and

FIELD GUIDE

those you are following the Lord with help one another in these areas so your way forward will be surer in Christ?

**GUARDING YOUR HEART:
PROTECTING YOUR SOUL IN A TEMPTING WORLD**



END NOTES

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5. *The ESV Study Bible: English Standard Version* (Crossway Bibles, 2008), ***PG #???
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