

KEEP YOUR HEART

STRONG SOULS (2)



T. M. MOORE

A REVISION STUDY FROM
THE FELLOWSHIP OF AILBE

Keep Your Heart
Strong Souls (2)
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Keep Your Heart

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Welcome to *Keep Your Heart*

A strong soul requires a well-kept heart.

The heart is one of three components of the soul, along with the mind and the conscience. But the heart is the heart of the matter in nurturing a strong soul. Unless we understand the heart and the affections it engenders, we will struggle to grow in our faith or to become strong for the Lord.

Happily, we have Jonathan Edwards, one of America's great thinkers, to guide us in understanding the importance of affections and the way to a well-kept heart.

We begin the first of several studies on the heart and the affections that issue from it.

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

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

May the Lord bless your study of His Word.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 The Essence of True Faith

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

Begin here

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

The strength and health of the soul depends on how we answer this question. To strengthen our soul, and the soul of our fellow believers, we must begin where Scripture does. Only then will our focus and priorities be what they should be. But where do we begin in the working to nurture strong souls?

Many answers have been proffered for this question. Some insist that holding right doctrine is the essence of true faith. You'll never know full and abundant life, these folks contend, until you embrace the full and glorious teaching of the great doctrines of the faith.

Others claim that nothing more than sincerely believing is the fundamental requirement. If you believe in Jesus, and you sincerely want to follow Him, then you're on solid footing for a fruitful journey with the Lord.

Still others argue that some extraordinary manifestation of the Spirit is the real hallmark of saving faith, though they limit this to just a few special manifestations, which they claim to have experienced for themselves.

And for some, identifying true believers is much easier: All true believers belong to the right church or denomination. Typically, mine.

Doctrine matters, of course, as does sincerity of faith and the evidence of spiritual life which the Spirit produces. Being in one denomination or church as opposed to another can also help. But do these, or any combination of them, constitute the essence of true faith?

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

The heart of the matter

By turning to Scripture, of course. Scripture alone is capable of fitting us for every good work (2 Tim. 3.15-17). So if we want strong souls and to be sure that we are operating out of true faith, we'll need to look to Scripture.

And when we do, Scripture counsels us that nurturing and sustaining a strong soul begins in the heart.

Solomon advised his son to "keep" his heart "with all diligence, for out of it *spring* the issues of life." All the great issues and concerns of our temporal and eternal existence are determined within us, in the heart, that spiritual entity which serves as the driving force of the soul. It is here, in the heart, where we nurture true faith and focus the work of strengthening the soul.

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

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

Keeping a close watch on the heart is the essence of true faith and the focal point for nurturing a strong soul.

Religious Affections

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

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

While in this study we are considering the nature of the soul according to three components – heart, mind, and conscience – Edwards understood the soul as being comprised of two primary faculties only. First is what he referred to as "perception". This encompasses all the activities of what we think of as the mind. As we shall see, the mind is in continuous communication with the heart and has a powerful influence on the kinds of affections – holy or profane – that characterize us.

The other faculty is what Edwards called "inclination". Here he refers to what the Scriptures mean by the term, "heart". The heart affects the ways we are bent in our souls, what we incline to, long for, seek after, desire, and, as a result, pursue and serve.

Heart and mind work together – with the conscience or will – to shape the soul and direct the life. In Edwards' view, following Solomon and Jesus, the heart is most important in making us the kind of people we are, and in determining the nature of our faith, whether it be true and sincere or shallow, false, and misleading.

Keeping the heart is thus the primary activity we engage to nurture and strengthen our soul. In this part of our study of strong souls, we will look more carefully at what Jonathan Edwards wrote concerning how to "keep" our hearts with all vigilance.

For reflection:

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

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

2 Heart of It All

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

Looking on our hearts

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

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

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

Each believer has a duty to strengthen the heart for vigorous and fruitful engagement in our calling to the Kingdom and glory of God (1 Thess. 2.12). Without strong hearts, we won’t have strong souls (Ps. 119.32).

Affections

Jonathan Edwards wrote that vigorous Christian faith depends on maintaining proper affections. When we hear the word *affection*, we might think of a feeling of fondness for another person. We say that we have affection for our spouses, children, and friends, and we associate that feeling with a kind of pleasantness, warmth, and wellbeing.

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

Don’t miss the key parts of that definition. First, affections are *vigorous*. That is, they have strength. They exert formative power. They can “affect” us, if you will, in many ways. They are the very “springs of motion” which vigorously exert themselves on every aspect of our lives. Every person’s heart bristles with affections. We cannot do without them. The challenge for the Christian in nurturing a strong soul is to make sure the *right* affections are *rightly* engaged toward *right* ends.

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

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is something *other* than love, an affection leading to inaction or wrong action toward another. True love issues in action, as Paul explains in 1 Corinthians 13.

Finally, note that affections tend to create a specific condition in the soul, an *inclination and will* of the soul, so that whatever affections we harbor in our hearts bend or incline us to act in certain ways, according to the set of affections which are strongest within us. The affections, in other words, shape the nature of our *character*.

Affections, it is thus clear, are the heart of it all when it comes to understanding the content of our souls and the character of our faith. The more we learn about affections and how to nurture and engage them, the stronger our soul will be for obedience to Christ and His calling.

A powerful thing

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

We need our affections to be “lively and powerful” for the purposes of Christ and His Kingdom. This doesn’t just happen; we must work at it, achieving mastery of our affections by understanding and keeping our heart according to the teaching of God’s Word.

It should not be difficult to determine the condition of our faith at any given time. All we need to do is examine the ways our heart is *vigorously* inclined, what kind of *fervor* for God and His will we evidence, and how these affections have shaped the *kind of people* we are. God looks on our heart, and we must, too, or the heart, which is by nature deceitful and desperately wicked, will cause our affections to go awry and lead us into a faith that is more travesty than truth (Jer. 17.9; 2 Cor. 6.12).

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

For reflection

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

Next steps – Preparation: In what kinds of ways – to what things and actions – is your heart “vigorously inclined”? What do you most desire? Long for? Think about with delight? Spend some time in prayer over these questions.

3 Two Kinds of Affections

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

The fruit of the heart

King Hezekiah served God all the days of his life, in everything he did, “with all his heart” (2 Chron. 31.21). Only late in life, when his wealth and power were at their greatest, was the heart of Hezekiah “lifted up”, whereupon the Lord sent a sickness to humble him in his pride. To his credit, Hezekiah was (2 Chron. 32.25).

Yet the seeds of self-interest took root during that season of his life, and later, when the envoys from Babylon arrived, Hezekiah could not resist the temptation to show them all his wealth, that they might be sure to know what a great man he was. At that point, “God withdrew from him, in order to test him, that he might know all *that was* in his heart” (my translation: I think “he” is better than “He” since God obviously already knew what was in the proud king’s heart).

Hezekiah died in heart failure, but not of his physical heart. He allowed his affections to stray from absolute devotion to God, and he set his people up for destruction by his failure of heart before the Lord.

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

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

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

Valid and useful

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

The key is to understand the different kinds of affections, to make sure they are properly focused and intensified, and to keep watch over our heart so that our affections continue to function as God intends.

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

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

Love

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

But we must make sure that love, which Edwards described as the supreme or commanding affection, is *focused* on the right objects – namely, God and our neighbors – and with the *proper intensity*. We must love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and our neighbors as ourselves. We must *not* love the world, as the apostles John and James warned. We must *not* love sin. We *must* love God and our neighbors. Love is *rightly focused* when it aims at those objects God prescribes. Hezekiah doubtless loved God into his old age; but at some point, his love became more focused on himself than on God or God's people. At that point, God withdrew from him.

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

The affection of love within us is rightly focused and with proper intensity when it meets the criteria spelled out for us in Scripture: love God supremely and in all things, and love your neighbor as yourself.

So true religion consists in making sure that we understand affections, that all our affections are engaged and properly focused, and that we are guarding and developing our affections – keeping watch over our hearts, as Solomon has it – so that we may continue to grow and flourish in a vigorous and lively expression of faith (Prov. 4.23). . Keeping our hearts means keeping them strong in all the affections God has set there, and all the affections properly focused and intensified. Hezekiah failed to keep the affections of his heart rightly focused on God and His people. We don't want that to happen to us.

We cannot expect to grow in true faith without such diligent guarding and nurturing of our hearts, engaging all our affections in love for God and our neighbors, and developing this love to ever greater degrees of intensity.

For reflection

1. What would be some examples of the affections that incline us *toward* someone or something.
2. What would be some examples of the affections that incline us *away* from someone or something.
3. Give examples of how each these affections operate in your life.

Next steps – Conversation: Talk with some Christian friends about how you might help one another increase in love for God and your neighbors. Commit what you decide to the Lord in prayer.

4 What about Hate?

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

Affections and healthy faith

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

That may strike some of us as strange, if not dangerous. Shouldn't we avoid hate at all costs, in all its kinds?

In Edwards' understanding of the affections, hate is not a "four-letter word." It is a perfectly valid and useful affection which, when properly understood and engaged, and focused with the right intensity, can, with other similar affections, help us to know a greater measure of true and lively faith in God. We can grow stronger in our soul when the hate we are *meant* to express is *rightly* expressed.

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

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

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

Hate evil

Our text commands the believer who *loves* the Lord to *hate* evil. Does it seem strange to think of love and hate as working together to accomplish God's will? It did not to the psalmist.

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

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

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It would be safe to say, in the light of this, that we cannot love God and sin at the same time. Indeed, we cannot be said truly to love God so long as we refuse to hate sin or continue to delight in it.

In the same way, *indifference* to things we are supposed to love, or a *lackadaisical* or *cavalier* attitude toward such discipleship duties as spiritual disciplines, worship, and the pursuit of holiness, will make space in our soul for us to begin loving such things as *spiritual indolence* and a kind of *status quo* “good-enough-for-me” Christianity.

Getting it right

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

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

In strong souls, hate, anger, fear, resentment, indignation, jealousy, and more have their proper place. As we cultivate the positive affections, especially love for God and neighbors, we will understand better the role these *negative* affections must play in our walk with and work for the Lord. But to dismiss them all as “not Christian” is to cripple the heart, weaken the soul, and compromise the life of faith.

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

For reflection

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

Next steps – Preparation: What do you hate? Do you hate what you should? Everything you should? Spend some time in prayer over these questions. Listen as the Lord guides you to begin making better use of this powerful affection.

5 Heat and Light

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

Right thinking

All this focus on affections might lead some to believe that *right thinking* doesn't have much of a part in the life of faith. As long as we're *feeling* the right way, toward the right objects, and with the right degree of intensity, then all must be well in our walk with the Lord. No need to bother with all that doctrine, those sticky ethical issues, or any strenuous thinking about anything. Just go with what you feel. Right?

Well, no.

We have the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2.16), and having the mind of Christ, and being continuously *renewed* in the mind of Christ, is crucial to getting our affections right. The heart must engage with the mind if affections are to perform their proper work. As Jonathan Edwards put it, "Holy affections are not heat without light; but evermore arise from some information of the understanding, some spiritual instruction that the mind receives, some light of actual knowledge."

Keeping the heart and renewing the mind go hand in hand in helping us to grow strong and mature in our soul. For unless we engage our mind to understand affections and many other matters, our heart – which of its own is deceitful and desperately wicked (Jer. 17.9) – will run us around into all kinds of distractions, and we will not develop the strong souls that lead to fruitful Christian lives.

Key to the heart

Edwards further wrote, "Knowledge is the key that first opens the heart, enlarges the affections, and opens the way for men into the kingdom of heaven..." So it's important, if our heart is to function properly, for us to have the right kind of knowledge in place as well. Of what does this knowledge consist, and where shall we go to obtain this knowledge? Since right *knowledge* is the key to having a right *heart*, we need to be as diligent in developing our mind as in nurturing and guarding our heart. But we need to know *where* to look and *what* to look for.

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

We need to read and study about divine things, pondering and weighing them carefully to discern their inherent beauty and desirability. At the same time, we must study to increase in knowledge about affections and how our beautiful God intends them to work.

Begin here

It will not surprise us that the place to begin such studies, of course, is in the Word of God. In Scripture God has given us ample expression of His character and will, and in a wide range of literary genre and forms, so that we may obtain a clear look at His loveliness through constant resort to His Word.

As with the renewing of our mind, this means we must be *willing* to invest the time required for reading, study, and meditation in the Bible, paying attention to whatever the Scriptures teach about affections and their proper function – much like what we are doing in this brief study on keeping the heart. It is hard work

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acquiring such knowledge of divine things as is necessary for the right shaping of our affections. If we're not willing to take the time to do this, or if we find reading and study of God's Word tedious, then we will not be able to develop our affections to the degree of vigor and fervency that indicates true and saving faith. And thus, rather than strengthening our soul, we will leave it weak and vulnerable to a wide range of temptations.

Put another way, if we're not willing to spend time in Scripture – regularly, deeply, and reflectively; that is, knowing there is a Source where we may discover and learn the beautiful things of God and His will, and the way He intends our soul to function, yet we are too busy or lazy or undisciplined to go there, then we're not likely to make any progress in renewing our mind or keeping our heart.

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

Certainly, there's a place for such interests and diversions, but they must be kept in their proper place, subservient to our calling to the Kingdom and glory of God (1 Thess. 2.12), and not taking the place thereof.

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

Vigorous affections and true and lively faith begin in knowledge – the knowledge of God and His loveliness. Only a clear and growing vision of God can help us gain the perspective on our own hearts that will allow affections to do their proper work in our lives. And only discipline and diligence will keep us at the task of mining such knowledge from the rich quarries of God's Word.

We must pursue such knowledge daily and diligently, to keep and nurture our hearts in line with God's good and perfect plan for strengthening our soul.

For reflection

1. The mind and heart must work together to get our affections right. Explain.
2. Meditate on Psalm 27.1-5. What do you see when you think of the beauty of the Lord?
3. How would you explain the beauty of the Lord to a new believer? Why is it so important to nurture a clear, expansive, and compelling vision of the Lord's beauty?

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

6 Nurturing Affections

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

Engaging the affections

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

Jonathan Edwards has some very good suggestions about how we may do this. He writes, “If true religion lies much in the *affections*, we may infer, that such means are to be desired, as have much tendency to move the affections.” By “move” here he means to engage them, get them properly focused, and begin to nurture them to a growing vigor or fervor. When our affections are properly moved, they move us to act in line with what we rightly desire. So it’s important to know whatever and as much as we can about moving our affections.

To what means shall we turn?

Prayer

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

Now let’s not miss this. Edwards is *not* saying we shouldn’t exalt God in prayer, humble ourselves before Him, and lay our requests at His feet. He’s saying we *should* do this, but not to *inform* or *persuade* God as much as to *affect our own hearts* with God’s greatness and our utter and complete dependence on Him. Prayer provides a conversational setting in which we may *visualize* the beautiful things of God and *reflect* on the state of our affections before Him. We need to be continuously reminded of the greatness and goodness of God and of our own meanness and need. We can do this in prayer, while we are in the very Presence of God, because we know that there we are safe and loved, no matter what we bring before our Father.

Prayer is a context, in other words, for talking with God so that the way *God* sees things – Himself, our lives, our needs, and so forth – becomes the way *we* see them as well. This can be an invaluable aid in nurturing godly affections, because in prayer we can survey our affections and wait upon the Lord to search, know, affirm, or correct us as needed (Ps. 139.23, 24).

Singing

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

He’s right, of course. We all understand the power of music to engage and move our affections. Music can lift our spirits, bring us to tears of joy, move us to boldness and shouting, and much more. So why don’t we sing any more than we do? Scripture offers many instances of commands to sing to the Lord. But how many of us actually do sing, other than when we’re together for corporate worship? Are we learning new songs to sing to the Lord? Do we take a song of praise or thanksgiving with us throughout the day? Do we work as hard at

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learning the lyrics and music of great hymns as we do at making sure our emails, texts, and social media are kept current?

Singing can greatly move our affections, but only if we actually do it unto the Lord.

The sacraments

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

Paul says that the bread and wine of the Supper are a “participation” in Jesus (NKJV “communion”, 1 Cor. 10.16). Jesus is truly present in these elements, albeit spiritually; but if we prepare well for the Supper and participate with full focus on the sacrament, we can know His Presence in deeper and more real ways. And this can have a powerful impact on our affections, beginning with our love for Him.

Preaching

Edwards also mentions the role of *preaching* in shaping our affections: “God hath appointed a particular and lively application of his word, in the preaching of it, as a fit means to affect sinners with the importance of religion, their own misery, the necessity of a remedy, and the glory and sufficiency of a remedy provided; to stir up the pure minds of the saints, quicken their affections by often bringing the great things of religion to their remembrance, and setting them in their proper colours...”

Here is counsel to pay careful attention to the preaching of the Word, so that we don’t miss the ways Scripture can move, convict, and improve our hearts. Too often we listen to preaching only for the information a sermon contains. We need the information, it’s true; but we also need to let the Word of God enter, search, and transform our heart, engaging our affections with the truth of God and strengthening our soul.

Keep it up

Finally, Edwards insists that affections must be nurtured through *practice*, what he calls “a spirit of earnestness in the Christian work and course.” We must apply ourselves in daily life to suppress and overcome affections that distract us from our walk with the Lord, and to implant and improve those that do.

Only daily practice, walking in obedience to the Lord, will bring together all these other means to help us grow in godly affections as we should.

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

For reflection

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

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Next steps – Transformation: How many of these “means” for nurturing proper affections are in place in your life? Where can you improve? Add something new to your today, and commit it to the Lord for nurturing your affections.

7 The Holy Spirit and Affections

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

The vital principle of our souls

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

Ultimately, only the Holy Spirit can bring forth godly affections in us. Jonathan Edwards wrote that the Holy Spirit, “dwelling as a vital principle in the souls, produces those effects wherein he exerts and communicates himself in his own *proper nature*.” He hastens to add, “Holiness is the nature of the Spirit of God...”

The Spirit of God within the believer is the *Holy Spirit*, and He alone, working with the Word of God, can bring true life to light within us. The life which He causes to grow in us will be the light of holiness, so that “not only the persons are called *spiritual*, as having the Spirit of God dwelling in them; but those qualifications, affections, and experiences that are wrought in them by the Spirit, are also *spiritual*.”

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

Growing in God's Spirit

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

First, make sure you understand and have embraced the destination toward which the Holy Spirit is working to take you (2 Cor. 3.12-18). His goal is to transform you into the image of Jesus Christ. The better you know Jesus, the more you contemplate Him and set your mind on Him (Col. 3.1-3), the more you will want the Spirit's destination to be yours as well. Keeping in step with and being filled by the Spirit means focusing on the same horizon and making daily progress toward it. And that horizon is Jesus, exalted in glory.

Second, cleanse your life of everything that is *contrary* to holiness and the Spirit of God. You cannot hold on to sin; you cannot continue to squander time that should be devoted to seeking the Lord; you cannot *not* devote yourself to growing in Christ and expect that the Spirit of God is going to cooperate with you one whit. He will not. Sin, spiritual lethargy or indifference, sluggishness of soul – all these can quench and grieve the Spirit, so that He does not produce in us the holy affections that make us more like Jesus. Take time to let Him search and cleanse you daily (Ps. 139.23, 24).

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

Third, understand what the Spirit is trying to do in your life, and make sure you're pulling your oars in the same direction as He. The Spirit wants to bring forth spiritual fruit in you (Gal. 5.22, 23); to equip and deploy you with spiritual gifts in service to others (1 Cor. 12.7-11); to use you in making disciples of others (Matt. 28.18-20); and to embolden you for witness to Jesus Christ in the everyday situations of your life (Acts 1.8).

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He wants to conform your thoughts, feelings, priorities, and daily practices to what Jesus would feel, think, and do were He in your place (2 Cor. 3.12-18).

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

Fourth, the Spirit searches our hearts and minds that He may convict us of sin, righteousness, and judgment as is necessary (Jn. 16.8-11). We must be willing for this to be an ongoing part of our daily walk with the Spirit. We must give ourselves to listening for His cues, promptings, and guidance throughout the day, so that He may purge us of our sins, draw forth from us praise and thanksgiving, instruct us in the way we should go, instill in us fear and dread of offending our heavenly Father, and fill us with Himself (Eph. 5.18-21).

Hard – but necessary – work

Only the Spirit of God can strengthen your soul, beginning with the affections that rule in your heart. We are commanded to walk in Him, be filled with Him, and rest in His Presence and power (Gal. 5.16; Eph. 5.18; Acts 1.8). But we'll have to work at this diligently, attentively, and continuously if we expect to keep our heart with all diligence and grow stronger in our soul.

This is hard work, daily work, and if we're not willing to take it up then we're simply admitting that we're not willing to be and have what God intends for us.

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

For reflection

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

Next steps – Transformation: Spend some focused time in prayer, asking the Lord how you can give yourself more completely to the Spirit's work in your heart. Try to identify one or two things you can do more consistently that will help you grow in holy affections.

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Questions for reflection or discussion

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

For prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Fellowship of Ailbe is a spiritual fellowship in the Celtic Christian tradition. Our goal is to promote revival, renewal, and awakening, following the teaching of Scripture and the example and heritage of our forebears in the faith.

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Thank you.