



Keeping the Heart

How to maintain
your love for God



JOHN FLAVEL

INTRODUCTION BY **J. I. PACKER**

CHRISTIAN
HERITAGE

Scripture quotations are taken from the *King James Version*.

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INTRODUCTION

I

‘Heart-work and heaven-work’ was Richard Baxter’s crisp characterisation of real Christianity. John Flavel, with just about every other Puritan teacher, would be in total agreement. Real Christianity has in the past been conceived in terms of orthodoxy, orthopraxy, churchmanship, sacramentalism, syncretism, and various other things, but the Puritans as a body defined it precisely in terms of communion with God – more precisely still, communion with the triune Lord through Jesus Christ the Mediator. That is what the two phrases in Baxter’s definition are pointing to. ‘Heaven-work’ signified a discipline of which Baxter himself was the supreme promoter, namely the practice of daily motivational meditation on the prospect of finally being with Christ in heaven. The purpose of this discipline was to keep the energy level of one’s discipleship as high as possible, as one continued living the forward-tilted life (so we may fairly describe it) with the eyes of one’s heart

fixed on the ultimate destination. 'Heart-work' was a tag term for the admonitory thought and repeated self-search that were constantly needed to sustain the most ardent love and devotion to Christ, and the firmest resistance to the many kinds of hostility and discouragement that in God's providence the Puritans had to face. John Flavel's *Keeping the Heart* (first published as *A Saint Indeed*) displays this finely, as we shall soon see.

What is the heart that Flavel, like Baxter, is talking about? The Puritan understanding of the heart is rooted, not in medical physiology, which knows the heart as a pump sending blood round the body, but in biblical theology and anthropology, which sees the heart as the central, dynamic core of personal life. The Bible uses the word in this way about a thousand times, and thereby highlights, illustrates and enforces the following truths:

(1) The human heart is the controlling source of all that we do in expression of what we are: all our thoughts, desires, discernments and decisions, our plans and purposes, our affections, attitudes and ambitions, all the wisdom and all the folly that mark our lives, come out of, and are fuelled, serviced and driven by, our hearts, for better or for worse. Our Lord Jesus showed Himself vividly aware of this. 'How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks' (Matt. 12:34). 'From within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person' (Mark 7:21-23).

(2) The salvation that God gives us in Christ is rooted in a created and creative change of heart, as described by Ezekiel in an oracle about the restoring of Israel following the captivity: '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' (Ezek. 36:26-27). The new, renewed heart becomes, on the one hand, the source of faith in Christ and in the gospel promises, whereby we enter a new relationship of acceptance with God; and, on the other hand, the source of love to God and man – the grateful, responsive, resolute purpose of honouring and pleasing God in all things, and seeking the best for our nearest and dearest and whoever else may cross our path. The new heart, acting in these ways, is in fact the sign of our salvation, and the inward discipline of sustaining such action is the reality of 'heart-work:' which, be it soberly said, is work indeed.

Saying this brings us to John Flavel and the book I am introducing. But before we look at the book, something should be said about the man himself.

II

A native of Bromsgrove in Worcestershire, Flavel was a preacher's son, and it does not appear that he ever wanted to be anything but a pastoral preacher himself. Born in 1628, he graduated from Oxford and became a pastor in 1650. The ministry for which he is remembered was located in Dartmouth, Devon, the port town to which he moved in 1656. He gained distinction as a preacher of the classic Puritan type, expository, analytical, didactic, applicatory, searching, converting and edifying, with divine unction regularly empowering his pulpit work. His writings reveal him as clear-headed and eloquent in the plain Puritan style, orthodox, Christ-focused and life-centred in his subject-matter, with his mind always set

on advancing true godliness, with peace and joy in the Lord. It is recorded of him that he spent much time in meditation, self-examination and prayer, and on one occasion at least he had an extraordinary experience of God. Meditating on horseback, 'his thoughts began to swell and rise higher and higher like the waters in Ezekiel's vision till at last they became an overflowing flood. Such was the intention of his mind, such the ravishing tastes of heavenly joys, and such the full assurance of his interest therein, that he utterly lost a sight and sense of this world and all the concerns thereof, and for some hours he knew no more where he was than if he had been in a deep sleep upon his bed.' Stopping, exhausted, at a wayside pool, 'he sat down and washed, earnestly desiring, if it were God's pleasure, that it might be his parting place from this world. Death had the most amiable face in his eye that ever he beheld, except the face of Jesus Christ which made it so, and he could not remember, though he believed himself dying, that he had one thought of his dear wife and children or any other earthly concernment.' When he finally reached the inn to which he was heading, the innkeeper said to him, 'Sir, what is the matter with you? You look like a dead man' – to which Flavel replied, 'I was never better in my life.' At the inn, 'the influence still continued, banishing sleep. Still, still the joy of the Lord overflowed him, and he seemed to be an inhabitant of the other world. He many years after called that day one of the days of heaven.' One thinks of Paul, caught up to what he called the third heaven, and of Jonathan Edwards weeping as he walked through the woods by reason of the vividness with which he perceived the glory and beauty of God. Well may we pause in awe for a moment before moving on.

Flavel was ejected from his pulpit in 1662 as a nonconformist, following the re-establishment of the Church of England by the Act of Uniformity which itself followed the

restoration of the monarchy in 1660. His people pressed him to continue his (now illegal) ministry to them, and this for two decades he did, preaching in private houses, in woodlands, on a rocky island in the Salcombe River estuary that was submerged at high tide, and in other places where the long arm of the law could be evaded. Then from 1682 to 1685 he joined with a Congregational church in London, assisting his friend William Jenkyn, commentator on Jude, who was its minister. Here, too, dodging arrest by the authorities (posses of soldiers sent out by the magistrates) was part of his way of life. When in 1687 James II lifted restrictions on nonconformist ministry, Flavel was already back in Dartmouth, and his still-loyal congregation at once erected a large church building in which his ministry could continue. He died in 1691, leaving a written legacy of biblical and devotional exposition that was first published as two large folios and that became 3,600 pages in six volumes in its 1968 reprint.

III

In *Keeping the Heart*, Flavel leads us into what, for him, is the most basic of all the disciplines of the Christian's inner life – basic to worship and prayer; basic to faith, hope and love; basic to humility, peace and joy; basic to pure-heartedness and steady obedience. What discipline is this? It is the discipline that we may call *admonitory meditation*, that is, the deployment within one's own mind of key lines of thought that will confirm and reinforce the various aspects of faithful communion with God, and recall us to Him in renewed loyalty when we have slipped away, or been drawn away, from the path of faithfulness. Such slippages begin in the mind, and begin with the contemplation of actual or potential disorder, moral or circumstantial, without relating the matter to God, and the practice of *admonitory meditation* is, in effect, talking

to oneself before the Lord, reminding oneself of truths about the ways of God and the grace of Christ that will energise and stabilise one for a return to, and continuance on, the path of faithfulness, no matter what. These truths, re-anchored in the heart by applicatory meditation, will stir believers to renew their prayers for strength to carry on through thick and thin. Flavel is vividly aware that sin and Satan are constantly alluring us to follow the gleam of unthinking blind desire, and he knows how vitally important it is to counter the away-from-God thoughts and moods that lay hold of us in a way that if not checked will ruin us. Most of *Keeping the Heart* is taken up with setting out the best lines of thought with which to sustain ourselves when thus tempted in life's various ups and downs.

Would I be wrong, I wonder, to guess that most of us nowadays do very little of this thoughtful inward arguing with ourselves in times of testing? We expect that when inward or outward circumstances expose us to temptation we shall recognise it straight away and be able to banish it with a simple 'no'. But in fact keeping the heart steady, zealous for God's glory and consciously close to Christ is not always so easily done, while our expectation that we shall be able to say 'no' when necessary without inward effort and struggle only shows how unrealistic we are, and how easily we are betrayed into doing wrong and foolish things believing them to be wise and right; how easily, too, we lapse into what T.S. Eliot called 'the ultimate treason: to do the right thing for the wrong reason'. Flavel makes it evident that for him there are no shortcuts here, and that blithe self-reliance in times of testing is the high road to spiritual suicide. May we absorb His wisdom as we sit at His feet.

J.I. Packer



INTRODUCTION

Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life (Prov. 4:23).

The heart of man is his worst part before it is regenerated, and the best afterward; it is the seat of principles, and the foundation of actions. The eye of God is, and the eye of the Christian ought to be, principally fixed upon it.

The greatest difficulty in conversion is to win the heart *to* God; and the greatest difficulty after conversion, is to keep the heart *with* God. Here lies the very force and stress of religion; here is that which makes the way to life a narrow way, and the gate to heaven a strait gate. Direction and help in this great work are the scope of the text: wherein we have:

1. An exhortation, 'Keep thy heart with all diligence.'
2. The reason or motive enforcing it, 'For out of it are the issues of life.'

In the exhortation I shall consider,

First, The matter of the duty.

Secondly, The manner of performing it.

1. The matter of the duty: *Keep thy heart*. Heart is not here taken properly for the noble part of the body, which philosophers call, 'the first that lives and the last that dies'; but by heart, in a metaphor, the Scripture sometimes represents some particular noble faculty of the soul. In Romans 1:21, it is put for the *understanding: their foolish heart*, that is, their foolish understanding *was darkened*. Psalm 119:11, it is put for the memory: 'Thy word have I hid in my heart'; and 1 John 3:20, it is put for the conscience, which includes both the light of the understanding and the recognitions of the memory; *if our heart condemn us*, that is, *if our conscience*, whose proper office it is to condemn.

But in the text we are to take it more generally, for the whole soul, or inner man. What the heart is to the body, that the soul is to the man; and what health is to the heart, that holiness is to the soul. The state of the whole body depends upon the soundness and vigour of the heart, and the everlasting state of the whole man upon the good or ill condition of the soul.

By keeping the heart, understand the *diligent and constant*¹ use of all holy means to preserve the soul from sin, and maintain its sweet and free communion with God. Lavater, commenting on the text, will have the word taken from a besieged garrison, beset by many enemies without, and in danger of being betrayed by treacherous citizens within, in which danger the soldiers, upon pain of death, are commanded to watch; and though the expression, *Keep thy heart*, seems to put it upon us as our work, yet it does

1 I say constant, for the reason added in the text extends the duty to all the states and conditions of a Christian's life, and makes it binding always. If the heart must be kept, because out of it are the issues of life, then as long as these issues of life do flow out of it, we are obliged to keep it.

not imply a sufficiency in us to do it. We are able to stop the sun in its course, or to make the rivers run backward, as by our own skill and power to rule and order our hearts. We may as well be our own *saviours* as our own *keepers*; and yet Solomon speaks properly enough when he says, *Keep thy heart*, because the duty is ours, though the power is of God; what power we have depends upon the exciting and assisting strength of Christ. Grace within us is beholden to grace without us. 'Without me ye can do nothing.' So much for the matter of the duty.

2. The manner of performing it is *with all diligence*. The Hebrew is very emphatical; *keep with all keeping*, or, *keep, keep*, set double guards. This vehemency of expression with which the duty is urged, plainly implies how difficult it is to keep our hearts, how dangerous to neglect them!

The motive to this duty is very forcible and weighty: 'For out of the heart are the issues of life.' That is, the heart is the source of all vital operations; it is the spring and original of both good and evil, as the spring in a watch that sets all the wheels in motion. The heart is the treasury, the hand and tongue but the shops; what is in these, comes from that; the hand and tongue always begin where the heart ends. The heart contrives, and the members execute: 'a good man, out of the good treasure of his heart, bringeth forth that which is good; and an evil man, out of the evil treasure of his heart, bringeth forth that which is evil: for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaketh.' So then, if the heart err in its work, these must miscarry in theirs; for heart errors are like the errors of the first concoction, which cannot be rectified afterward; or like the misplacing and inverting of the stamps and letters in the press, which must cause so

many errata in all the copies that are printed. O then how important a duty is that which is contained in the following proposition: *The keeping and right managing of the heart in every condition, is one great business of a Christian's life.*

What the philosopher says of waters, is as properly applicable to hearts; it is hard to keep them within any bounds. God has set limits to them, yet how frequently do they transgress not only the bounds of grace and religion, but even of reason and common honesty? This is that which affords the Christian matter of labour and watchfulness, to his dying day. It is not the cleaning of the *hand* that *makes* the Christian, for many a hypocrite can show as fair a hand as he; but the purifying, watching, and right ordering of the *heart*; this is the thing that provokes so many sad complaints, and costs so many deep groans and tears. It was the pride of Hezekiah's heart that made him lie in the dust, mourning before the Lord. It was the fear of hypocrisy invading the heart that made David cry, 'Let my heart be sound in thy statutes, that I be not ashamed.' It was the sad experience he had of the divisions and distractions of his own heart in the service of God, that made him pour out the prayer, 'Unite my heart to fear thy name.'

The method in which I propose to improve the proposition is this:

First, I shall inquire what the keeping of the heart supposes and imports.

Secondly, Assign divers reasons why Christians must make this a leading business of their lives.

Thirdly, Point out those seasons which especially call for this diligence in keeping the heart.

Fourthly, Apply the whole.

What the Keeping of the Heart Supposes and Imports

To keep the heart, necessarily supposes a previous work of regeneration, which has set the heart right, by giving it a new spiritual inclination, for as long as the heart is not *set right* by grace as to its habitual frame, no means can *keep it right* with God. Self is the poise of the unrenewed heart, which biases and moves it in all its designs and actions; and as long as it is so, it is impossible that any external means should keep it with God.

Man, originally, was of one constant, uniform frame of spirit, held one straight and even course; not one thought or faculty was disordered: his mind had a perfect knowledge of the requirements of God, his will a perfect compliance therewith; all his appetites and powers stood in a most obedient subordination.

Man, by the apostacy, is become a most disordered and rebellious creature, opposing his Maker, as the *First Cause*, by self-dependence; as the *Chief Good*, by self-love; as the *Highest Lord*, by self-will; and as the *Last End*, by self-seeking.

Thus he is quite disordered, and all his actions are irregular. But by regeneration the disordered soul is set right; this great change being, as the Scripture expresses it, the renovation of the soul after the image of God, in which *self-dependence* is removed by faith; *self-love*, by subjection and obedience to the will of God; and *self-seeking* by self-denial. The darkened understanding is illuminated, the refractory will sweetly subdued, the rebellious appetite gradually conquered. Thus the soul which sin had universally depraved, is by grace restored. This being pre-supposed, it will not be difficult to apprehend what it is to keep the heart, which is nothing but *the constant care and diligence of such a renewed man to preserve his soul in that holy frame to which grace has raised it*. For though grace has, in a great measure, rectified the soul, and given it an habitual heavenly temper; yet sin often actually discomposes it again; so that even a gracious heart is like a musical instrument, which though it be exactly tuned, a small matter brings it out of tune again; yea, hand it aside but a little, and it will need setting again before another lesson can be played upon it. If gracious hearts are in a desirable frame in one duty, yet how dull, dead, and disordered when they come to another! Therefore every duty needs a particular preparation of the heart. 'If thou prepare thine heart and stretch out thine hands toward him...' To keep the heart then, is carefully to preserve it from sin, which disorders it; and maintain that spiritual frame which fits it for a life of communion with God.

This includes in it six particulars:

1. Frequent observation of the frame of the heart. Carnal and formal persons take no heed to this; they cannot be brought to confer with their own hearts: there are some people who have lived forty or fifty years in the world,

and have had scarcely one hour's discourse with their own hearts. It is a hard thing to bring a man and himself together on such business; but saints know those soliloquies to be very salutary. The heathen could say, 'the soul is made wise by sitting still in quietness.' Though bankrupts care not to look into their accounts, yet upright hearts will know whether they go backward or forward. 'I commune with mine own heart,' says David. The heart can never be kept until its case be examined and understood.

2. It includes deep humiliation for heart evils and disorders; thus Hezekiah humbled himself for the pride of his heart. Thus the people were ordered to spread forth their hands to God in prayer, realizing the plague of their own hearts. Upon this account many an upright heart has been laid low before God; '*O what an heart have I.*' Saints have in their confession pointed at the heart, the pained place: '*Lord, here is the wound.*' It is with the heart well kept, as it is with the eye; if a small dust get into the eye it will never cease twinkling and watering till it has wept it out: so the upright heart cannot be at rest till it has wept out its troubles and poured out its complaints before the Lord.

3. It includes earnest supplication and instant prayer for purifying and rectifying grace when sin has defiled and disordered the heart. 'Cleanse thou me from secret faults.' 'Unite my heart to fear thy name.' Saints have always many such petitions before the throne of God's grace; this is the thing which is most pleaded by them with God. When they are praying for outward mercies, perhaps their spirits may be more remiss; but when it comes to the heart's case, they extend their spirits to the utmost, fill their mouths with arguments, weep and make supplication: 'O for a better

heart! Oh for a heart to love God more; to hate sin more; to walk more evenly with God. Lord! deny not to me such a heart, whatever thou deny me: give me a heart to fear thee, to love and delight in thee, if I beg my bread in desolate places.' It is observed of an eminent saint, that when he was confessing sin, he would never give over confessing until he had felt some brokenness of heart for that sin; and when praying for any spiritual mercy, would never give over that suit till he had obtained some relish of that mercy.

4. It includes the imposing of strong engagements upon ourselves to walk more carefully with God, and avoid the occasions whereby the heart may be induced to sin. Well advised and deliberate vows are, in some cases, very useful to guard the heart against some special sin. 'I have made a covenant with mine eyes,' says Job. By this means holy men have overawed their souls, and preserved themselves from defilement.

5. It includes a constant and holy jealousy over our own hearts. Quick sighted self-jealousy is an excellent preservative from sin. He that will keep his heart, must have the eyes of the soul awake and open upon all the disorderly and tumultuous stirrings of his affections; if the affections break loose, and the passions be stirred, the soul must discover it, and suppress them before they get to a height. 'O my soul, dost thou well in this? My tumultuous thoughts and passions, where is your commission?' Happy is the man that thus feareth always. By this fear of the Lord it is that men depart from evil, shake off sloth and preserve themselves from iniquity. He that will keep his heart must eat and drink with fear, rejoice with fear, and pass the whole time of his sojourning here in fear. All this is little enough to keep the heart from sin.

6. It includes the realizing of God's presence with us, and setting the Lord always before us. This the people have found a powerful means of keeping their hearts upright, and awing them from sin. When the eye of our faith is fixed upon the eye of God's omniscience, we dare not let out our thoughts and affections to vanity. Holy Job durst not suffer his heart to yield to an impure, vain thought, and what was it that moved him to so great circumspection? He tells us, 'Doth not He see my ways, and count all my steps?'

In such particulars as these do gracious souls express the care they have of their hearts. They are careful to prevent the breaking loose of the corruptions in time of temptation; careful to preserve the sweetness and comfort they have got from God in any duty. This is the work, and of all works in religion it is the most difficult, constant, and important work.

(i) It is the hardest work. Heart-work is hard work indeed. To shuffle over religious duties with a loose and heedless spirit, will cost no great pains; but to set thyself before the Lord, and tie up thy loose and vain thoughts to a constant and serious attendance upon him; this will cost thee something. To attain a facility and dexterity of language in prayer, and put thy meaning into apt and decent expressions, is easy; but to get thy heart broken for sin, while thou art confessing it; melted with free grace while thou art blessing God for it; to be really ashamed and humbled through the apprehensions of God's infinite holiness, and to keep thy heart in this frame, not only in, but after duty, will surely cost thee some groans and pains of soul. To repress the outward acts of sin, and compose the external part of thy life in a laudable manner, is no great matter; even carnal persons, by the force of common principles, can do this: but to kill the root of corruption within, to set and

keep up an holy government over thy thoughts, to have all things lie straight and orderly in the heart, this is not easy.

(ii) It is a constant work. The keeping of the heart is a work that is never done till life is ended. There is no time or condition in the life of a Christian which will suffer an intermission of this work. It is in keeping watch over our hearts, as it was in keeping up Moses' hands while Israel and Amalek were fighting. No sooner do the hands of Moses grow heavy and sink down, than Amalek prevails. Intermitting the watch over their own hearts for but a few minutes, cost David and Peter many a sad day and night.

(iii) It is the most important business of a Christian's life. Without this we are but formalists in religion: all our professions, gifts and duties signify nothing. 'My son, give me thine heart,' is God's request. God is pleased to call that a gift which is indeed a debt; he will put this honour upon the creature, to receive it from him in the way of a gift; but if this be not given him, he regards not whatever else you bring to him. There is only so much of worth in what we do, as there is of heart in it. Concerning the heart, God seems to say, as Joseph of Benjamin, 'If you bring not Benjamin with you, you shall not see my face.' Among the Heathen, when the beast was cut up for sacrifice, the first thing the priest looked upon was the heart; and if that was unsound and worthless the sacrifice was rejected. God rejects all duties (how glorious soever in other respects) which are offered him without the heart. He that performs duty without the heart, that is, heedlessly, is no more accepted with God than he that performs it with a double heart, that is, hypocritically.

Thus I have briefly considered what the keeping of the heart supposes and imports. I proceed: