

# john flavel keeping the heart

john flavel keeping the heart is a timeless and profoundly practical subject, offering enduring wisdom for navigating the complexities of spiritual life. This comprehensive article delves into the essence of John Flavel's teachings on maintaining a guarded and rightly ordered inner life, exploring the biblical imperatives and the practical strategies he advocated. We will examine the nature of the heart as the central locus of Christian experience, the constant threats it faces, and the vital necessity of diligent self-watchfulness. Furthermore, this exploration will illuminate Flavel's insights into the disciplines and graces required for a flourishing spiritual walk, making "keeping the heart" not merely an abstract concept but a vibrant reality.

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## Understanding the Primacy of the Heart

John Flavel, a prominent Puritan minister, placed immense emphasis on the centrality of the human heart in the Christian life. For Flavel, the heart was not merely an organ of emotion, but the very core of a person's being – the seat of affections, will, intellect, and conscience. It is from the heart, he argued, that all outward actions and spiritual vitality spring. This understanding is deeply rooted in biblical teachings, such as Proverbs 4:23, which states, "Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life." Flavel saw this verse as the foundational principle for all spiritual endeavors.

The implications of the heart's primacy are far-reaching. If the heart is defiled or disordered, then all outward expressions of faith will inevitably be compromised. Conversely, a heart rightly focused on God and His Word will naturally lead to godly living and true spiritual fruitfulness. This internal orientation is what distinguishes genuine faith from mere outward profession. Flavel's advocacy for keeping the heart was, therefore, a call to cultivate a deep and abiding connection with God at the very source of one's spiritual life.

# **The Heart as the Source of Spiritual Life**

Flavel meticulously detailed how the spiritual life begins and is sustained by the condition of the heart. A regenerate heart, transformed by the Holy Spirit, becomes a fertile ground for faith, hope, and love. It is here that the seeds of divine truth are sown and nurtured, leading to spiritual growth and a desire for communion with God. Without this internal disposition, religious practices remain hollow rituals.

The transformation of the heart is a work of God's grace, but Flavel was equally insistent on the believer's responsibility to diligently guard and cultivate this inner sanctuary. This involves a conscious and ongoing effort to align one's thoughts, desires, and intentions with the will of God. The health of the entire Christian life—from prayer and worship to evangelism and perseverance—is inextricably linked to the state of the heart.

## **The Dangers and Enemies of the Heart**

A central theme in Flavel's exposition of "keeping the heart" is the pervasive and insidious nature of threats that seek to corrupt and divert it from its proper object. He recognized that the Christian life is a spiritual warfare, and the heart is the primary battleground. These dangers arise from both internal corruption and external influences, demanding constant vigilance.

Flavel identified several key enemies that lie in wait to ensnare the heart. These are not always overt temptations, but often subtle shifts in focus, affections, and desires that can gradually lead a believer astray. Understanding these threats is the first step in effectively guarding against them. The diligence required for keeping the heart stems directly from the severity and pervasiveness of these dangers.

## **Internal Corruptions and Sinful Affections**

One of Flavel's most significant insights was his detailed cataloging of the internal corruptions that reside within the unregenerate and unmortified heart. These include pride, self-love, covetousness, envy, lust, and a host of other sinful affections. These inclinations are not external forces imposed upon us, but inherent tendencies that, if unchecked, will lead to spiritual decay. Flavel stressed that these corruptions are particularly dangerous because they are subtle and often disguised, making them difficult to recognize and combat.

He argued that these inner corruptions fuel outward sin. A thought of pride can lead to boastful words, and a seed of covetousness can blossom into dishonest actions. Therefore, the work of keeping the heart involves a constant, introspective examination of one's affections, identifying and mortifying these sinful desires

before they gain dominance and lead to open transgression. This requires a deep work of self-awareness and reliance on the Holy Spirit's power for sanctification.

## **External Snares and Worldly Distractions**

Beyond internal corruptions, Flavel also warned against the multitude of external snares that the world presents. These encompass the allure of worldly pleasures, the pursuit of earthly riches, the desire for human approval, and the constant barrage of distractions that can pull the mind away from God. In Flavel's era, as in ours, the world offered a siren song of temporal satisfactions that competed for the heart's devotion.

He understood that these external influences often exploit the internal corruptions. The desire for wealth (an internal corruption) makes one susceptible to the world's emphasis on material possessions. The lust for power (an internal corruption) makes one vulnerable to the schemes of political ambition. Flavel exhorted believers to be acutely aware of these external temptations and to develop a resolute spirit of detachment, understanding that true contentment and lasting joy are found only in God, not in the fleeting pleasures of the world.

## **The Divine Mandate for Heart-Keeping**

John Flavel's emphasis on keeping the heart was not a novel theological invention but a robust exposition of a clear divine command. Scripture repeatedly calls believers to guard their inner lives, underscoring its supreme importance in the Christian journey. This mandate is not a suggestion but a fundamental requirement for authentic discipleship and enduring fellowship with God.

The divine injunction to keep the heart is rooted in God's omniscience; He sees and judges the thoughts and intentions of men. Therefore, obedience to this command is not merely about outward behavior, but about cultivating an inner disposition that honors God. This understanding elevates the significance of the heart-keeping discipline from a personal preference to a vital aspect of fulfilling God's will.

## **Biblical Imperatives for Vigilance**

The Bible is replete with exhortations for believers to exercise diligent care over their hearts. Proverbs 4:23, "Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life," stands as a cornerstone text. However, numerous other passages reinforce this theme:

- Philippians 4:7 speaks of the "peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." This implies an active role in allowing God's peace to govern our inner states.
- 1 Peter 5:8 instructs believers to "Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour." This clearly points to the need for vigilance regarding the heart's vulnerability.
- Colossians 3:2 urges, "Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth." This directs the focus of the heart towards eternal realities.
- Hebrews 4:12 emphasizes the penetrating power of God's Word, which can discern "thoughts and intentions of the heart." This highlights the accountability of our inner lives before God.

Flavel's teaching systematically unpacks these biblical commands, presenting them not as burdensome rules, but as essential pathways to spiritual health and vitality. He saw these directives as expressions of God's loving concern for His people, guiding them toward a life that truly reflects His glory.

## **The Role of the Holy Spirit in Heart-Keeping**

While Flavel strongly emphasized the believer's active responsibility in keeping the heart, he was equally clear that this task cannot be accomplished in one's own strength. The Holy Spirit plays an indispensable role in enabling and empowering believers to maintain a Christ-centered inner life. Without the Spirit's indwelling presence and divine assistance, human efforts would ultimately prove insufficient against the onslaught of sin and worldly distractions.

The Spirit convicts of sin, guides into truth, strengthens the will, and cultivates the graces necessary for spiritual warfare. Flavel understood that true heart-keeping involves a constant reliance on the Spirit's promptings and power. It is a cooperative endeavor, where the believer diligently applies the means of grace, and the Spirit works within to transform and secure the heart. This divine enablement ensures that the discipline of heart-keeping is not a grim obligation but a Spirit-empowered pursuit of holiness.

## **Practical Strategies for Keeping the Heart**

John Flavel did not offer abstract theology without practical application. His writings are rich with actionable advice for believers seeking to actively keep their hearts guarded and focused on God. He understood that spiritual disciplines, when faithfully practiced, are the means through which God sanctifies

His people and protects their inner lives from corruption and diversion. These strategies are designed to build a robust inner defense system, fortified by God's grace.

The consistent application of these practical steps is what transforms the theoretical understanding of heart-keeping into a living, dynamic reality. Flavel's counsel is both profound and accessible, offering tangible ways to engage in this vital aspect of Christian discipleship. These are not quick fixes, but the bedrock of consistent spiritual growth.

## **Diligent Use of God's Word and Prayer**

Central to Flavel's strategy for heart-keeping was the disciplined engagement with God's Word and the practice of prayer. He viewed Scripture as the divine blueprint for the soul, providing the knowledge of God's will, the understanding of sin, and the promises of His grace that are essential for maintaining a godly perspective. Regular, thoughtful meditation on Scripture saturates the mind with truth, which then acts as a powerful defense against error and temptation.

Prayer, in Flavel's view, was the vital channel of communication with God, the source of strength, wisdom, and comfort. He encouraged fervent, consistent prayer, both personal and corporate, as a means of laying before God the condition of the heart, seeking His guidance, confessing sins, and drawing near to Him. The practice of prayer keeps the heart tethered to its divine object, preventing it from drifting into vain or sinful preoccupations. He often spoke of prayer as the "duty of duties" for those concerned with their souls.

## **Self-Examination and Watchfulness**

Flavel placed a high premium on the practice of self-examination and constant watchfulness. This involves a regular, honest assessment of one's thoughts, motives, desires, and actions. He advocated for introspective habits, urging believers to ask themselves: What is occupying my thoughts? What are my dominant desires? Am I tending towards God or away from Him? This diligent self-scrutiny is crucial for identifying subtle drifts and unacknowledged sins before they take root.

Watchfulness, the active outward and inward guarding of the heart, is a natural consequence of self-examination. It means being alert to potential dangers, both from the world and from within. This involves cultivating a sensitive conscience, discerning the subtle promptings of the Spirit, and resisting the allure of sin and distraction. Flavel taught that this vigilance is not a burden but a privilege, a demonstration of our commitment to God and our desire for spiritual purity.

## **Cultivating Godly Affections and Desires**

Keeping the heart is not solely about negative restraint; it is also about actively cultivating positive, godly affections and desires. Flavel understood that the heart is a field that can either be overgrown with weeds or carefully cultivated with precious flowers. Therefore, believers are called to intentionally foster a love for God, a thirst for righteousness, a desire for holiness, and a deep longing for Christ's return.

This is achieved by meditating on the excellencies of God, the beauty of Christ, and the glorious realities of heaven. By regularly dwelling on these truths, the believer's affections are gradually reoriented and strengthened. The more the heart is filled with love for God and His ways, the less room there is for the affections to be captivated by sin and the transient pleasures of the world. This positive cultivation is a proactive approach to spiritual health.

## **The Rewards of a Guarded Heart**

The diligent effort required to keep the heart is not without its profound and lasting rewards. John Flavel consistently pointed to the manifold blessings that flow from a heart rightly ordered and devoted to God. These rewards are not merely temporal comforts, but deep, intrinsic joys and a stable, fruitful Christian life that testifies to God's grace. The pursuit of heart-keeping is ultimately a pursuit of God's own favor and the abundant life He promises.

These blessings are the natural outworking of a heart that is in tune with its Creator. They represent a foretaste of eternal glory and a demonstration of God's faithfulness to those who diligently seek Him. The rewards serve as a powerful encouragement to persevere in the demanding but ultimately glorious work of guarding one's inner life.

## **Inner Peace and Contentment**

One of the most significant rewards of keeping the heart is the attainment of true inner peace and contentment. When the heart is fixed on God, it is insulated from the anxieties and turmoil that plague the ungodly. The peace that surpasses understanding, as described in Philippians 4:7, becomes a tangible reality, guarding the soul against the storms of life. This peace is not the absence of trials, but a deep-seated assurance and rest in God's sovereign care and unchanging promises.

Contentment, too, flourishes in a guarded heart. Instead of chasing fleeting worldly satisfactions, the heart that is fixed on God finds its ultimate satisfaction in Him. This leads to a remarkable inner resilience, enabling believers to face adversity with grace and gratitude, knowing that their true wealth and joy are

not dependent on external circumstances. This contentment is a powerful witness to the sufficiency of Christ.

## **Spiritual Fruitfulness and Growth**

A guarded heart is a fertile ground for spiritual fruitfulness and sustained growth. When the heart is free from the choking weeds of sin and distraction, it can readily receive and cultivate the seeds of divine truth. This results in a life characterized by the fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).

Furthermore, a heart kept with diligence is more responsive to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, leading to deeper communion with God, a clearer understanding of His Word, and a greater capacity for effective ministry and service. This ongoing growth is a hallmark of genuine faith and a testament to God's sanctifying work in the lives of His people. It enables believers to live lives that are increasingly reflective of Christ's character and purpose.

## **A Stronger Testimony and God's Glory**

Finally, the rewards of keeping the heart extend to the believer's testimony and the ultimate glory of God. A life marked by inner peace, consistent righteousness, and spiritual fruitfulness becomes a powerful witness to the transformative power of the Gospel. Such a life demonstrates that true fulfillment and lasting joy are found not in worldly pursuits, but in a vibrant relationship with the living God.

When believers diligently guard their hearts, they present themselves as vessels purified and prepared for God's use. This consecrates their lives and actions to His glory, allowing His grace and power to shine through them. In this way, the disciplined effort of heart-keeping becomes a means by which God is magnified and His kingdom is advanced in the world. It is a life lived unto Him, bringing Him honor in all things.

## **John Flavel's Enduring Legacy on Heart-Keeping**

John Flavel's teachings on "keeping the heart" have transcended his own time, offering a perennial source of wisdom and encouragement for Christians across generations. His methodical approach, biblical grounding, and practical insights have made his work an indispensable resource for those seeking to navigate the spiritual landscape with diligence and discernment. The enduring relevance of his counsel speaks to the unchanging nature of human hearts and the timeless principles of Christian discipleship.

Flavel's legacy is not merely academic; it is profoundly practical and transformative. His writings serve as a compass, guiding believers through the complexities of spiritual warfare and toward a life of deeper communion with God. The impact of his work continues to shape the understanding and practice of heart-keeping for countless individuals and churches.

## **Timeless Relevance for Modern Believers**

In an age characterized by rapid change, constant distractions, and subtle spiritual compromises, Flavel's emphasis on guarding the heart is more pertinent than ever. The enemies he identified—pride, covetousness, worldly allurements—remain potent forces in contemporary society. The digital age, with its endless streams of information and entertainment, presents new and intensified challenges to maintaining focus on God.

Flavel's practical strategies, such as diligent prayer, Scripture meditation, and self-examination, provide a stable and effective framework for spiritual resilience in the face of these modern pressures. His insights remind believers that the fundamental battle for the soul is an internal one, and that true spiritual vitality stems from a well-guarded heart. His legacy equips believers to apply age-old wisdom to their unique contemporary circumstances.

## **A Call to Continued Diligence**

John Flavel's work ultimately serves as a powerful call to continued diligence in the pursuit of a sanctified inner life. He did not offer a formula for effortless spirituality, but a robust framework for intentional effort, empowered by God's grace. The ongoing task of keeping the heart requires persistent commitment, unwavering faith, and a humble reliance on the Holy Spirit.

His legacy encourages believers not to grow weary in well-doing, but to embrace the challenging yet rewarding discipline of heart-keeping as an essential aspect of their walk with Christ. It is a call to live lives that are not only outwardly righteous but inwardly pure, bringing glory to God and experiencing the abundant life that He promises to those who seek Him with all their hearts.

### **FAQ**

#### **Q: Why did John Flavel consider the heart so important in Christian life?**

A: John Flavel considered the heart the central core of a person's being, encompassing their affections, will, intellect, and conscience. He believed that the condition of the heart was the source from which all outward actions and spiritual vitality spring, echoing biblical principles that emphasize its profound

influence on one's entire life and relationship with God.

**Q: What specific dangers did John Flavel warn about concerning the heart?**

A: Flavel warned about both internal corruptions such as pride, self-love, and covetousness, and external snares like worldly pleasures, the pursuit of riches, and the desire for human approval. He taught that these dangers subtly erode spiritual health and lead to a diversion of affections from God.

**Q: How did John Flavel suggest believers actively keep their hearts?**

A: Flavel advocated for several practical strategies, including the diligent use of God's Word and prayer, consistent self-examination, constant watchfulness against sin and distraction, and the active cultivation of godly affections and desires towards God.

**Q: Is keeping the heart a solely human effort according to John Flavel?**

A: No, Flavel emphasized that while believers have a responsibility for diligent effort, the ultimate power and enablement for keeping the heart comes from the Holy Spirit. He saw it as a cooperative endeavor between divine grace and human obedience.

**Q: What are the benefits or rewards of a guarded heart, according to Flavel?**

A: Flavel taught that a guarded heart leads to profound rewards such as inner peace and contentment, spiritual fruitfulness and growth, a stronger Christian testimony, and ultimately, the greater glory of God. These blessings are the natural outworking of a heart devoted to its Creator.

**Q: How relevant are John Flavel's teachings on keeping the heart in today's world?**

A: Flavel's teachings are highly relevant today, perhaps even more so due to the pervasive distractions of modern life, such as technology and media. His emphasis on internal spiritual discipline provides a vital antidote to the superficiality and anxieties that often characterize contemporary society.

## **Q: Did John Flavel believe that keeping the heart meant avoiding all worldly engagement?**

A: Flavel did not advocate for complete withdrawal from the world, but rather for a discerning engagement. He stressed the importance of maintaining a spiritual detachment from worldly allurements and affections, ensuring that one's ultimate loyalty and focus remain on God, even while living in the world.

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