



"Unless controlled by Christ, the conscience is not trustworthy."
—Arlo F. Newell

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Our Hidden Enemy

[The world](#) is full of dangers. We are under the constant threat of terrorism. Crime, too, is a perennial problem, and although it tends to be greater in cities, it frequently strikes in rural areas. We have to be careful about what we eat, as it may be contaminated with disease. And speaking of disease, lethal pathogens can spread swiftly from remote areas of the globe even into medically advanced nations. Nor should we discount the perils of natural disasters, accidents, genetic weaknesses, civil disturbances—and a host of potentially hazardous circumstances.

Yet, one of our greatest enemies lurks within us, poised to bring disaster upon us if we allow it to take control. This devious, corrupt enemy even hides its motives from itself, so that its owner does not really know it. It is full of deceit, folly, and incurable corruption, and it often prompts us to act against our best interests before we are even aware that we are weakly following its urges. Just what is this enemy that is so well concealed, evil, and against our own good?

[Jeremiah 17:9](#) reveals it to us: "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?" As the *Expositor's Commentary* points out, "In [Old Testament](#) usage, the heart signifies the total inner being

and includes reason." The heart is a biblical code word for the way we think, feel, and make decisions, and unfortunately, it is heavily influenced by our bodily needs and desires (which the Bible calls our flesh), as well as the promptings of [Satan](#) the Devil.

However, [God](#) does not leave us without instruction on how to protect ourselves from the misguidance of our hearts. [Proverbs 4:23](#) cautions, "Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life." We are to keep or guard the heart with great care and attentiveness, watching over it like a hawk, as it were, because to a large degree it determines the course of our lives. Guarding the heart is serious business to God.

To guard something is to watch over or care for, to protect, to control. A guard must remain vigilant and take precautions both not to be surprised by his [adversary](#) and to avoid being distracted. If we take this responsibility in a casual manner, we are likely to let our diligence slip, and the enemy, our own heart, will break out and cause us harm.

Indeed, there is guard duty, and then there is guard duty. When I was still in the military, I pulled guard duty on motor pools, warehouses, and supply depots here in the United States. These areas are relatively safe, well lit, and should trouble develop, help is just around the corner. But guarding a position on the front line brings a whole different standard of vigilance to the term "guard." Here, the area is dark, and the enemy may appear at any time with lethal force. Guard duty in the midst of war can require hours of intense listening for any sound and scanning the darkness to detect any movement that might indicate an approaching enemy. Dozing off, being distracted, and failing to take guard duty seriously could well mean death for the guard and for the others that depend on him to do his job in keeping them safe. This is the kind of guard duty required to protect our hearts.

Why is guard duty on our hearts so important? Because the heart directs us in all we do, if we are not alert in this culture, where temptation, distraction, and ungodly ideas bombard us constantly, it can lead us to [sin](#) and on to all of its terrible consequences. In effect, guarding our heart is where our conversion begins and ends. If with God's help we can control our heart, we are well on the path toward righteousness and godliness.

The heart will justify hatred, prejudice, lust, laziness, anger, revenge, [gossip](#), criticism, resentment, idolatry, murder, theft, deceit, selfishness, etc.! It will soften black and white into shades of gray. It will manipulate circumstances to provide it opportunities to do what it wants. It will play games of "just this once" and "God wants me to be happy." It will patiently erode even the most resolute decision through doubts, temptations, and twisted reasoning. It is a formidable adversary, and thus must be dealt with, as the proverb says, diligently and firmly.

Why must we take such a hard line with it? "Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the [law of God](#), nor indeed can be" ([Romans 8:7](#)). For all the years prior to our calling, our hearts, which we trusted, had been programmed in this world by Satan. The heart had had its way, and it had become used to its freedom to sin at will, to fulfill its desires, to get its way. But when God calls us to His way of life, the heart is required to change drastically—to the point that God says that He must give us new hearts (see [Ezekiel 36:26](#)). Even with the Spirit of God at work within us, the heart will work to do all it can to satisfy itself.

[Proverbs 4:24-26](#) lays out the general parameters of what we have to do to stay out of trouble: "Put away from you a deceitful mouth, and put perverse lips far from you. Let your eyes look straight ahead, and your eyelids look right before you. Ponder the path of your feet, and let all your ways be established." The advice is to control what one says and does and what one allows his eyes to view. In other words, we are to monitor both what comes into our hearts and what we allow our heart to spit out as words and deeds. Jesus says in [Mark 7:15](#), "[T]he things which come out of him, those are the things which defile a man." It is the old "garbage in, garbage out" process. God wants us to reverse this human failing so that it becomes "[goodness](#) in, goodness out."

Paul writes in [Hebrews 6:10-12](#):

For God is not unjust to forget your works and labor of [love](#) which you have shown toward His name, in that you have ministered to the saints, and do minister. And we desire that each one of you

show the same diligence to the full assurance of hope until the end, that you do not become sluggish, but imitate those who through [faith](#) and [patience](#) inherit the promises.

God is indeed faithful to remember our labor of love toward Him, others, and ourselves in guarding our hearts, a duty that is so necessary in the transformation of our natures to the image of His glorious character. The hope that he mentions is our earnest desire for and sure expectation of the [Kingdom of God](#). This hope motivates us to keep watch over our minds so that we can persist in living righteously to the end of our lives or until the [return of Jesus Christ](#). So, as Paul encourages us, let us not be slothful in our guard duty but show true diligence in warding our heart.

[Jesus Christ](#) was tempted in all points as we are, yet He lived more than three decades without sin ([Hebrews 4:15](#)). How did He accomplish all this? It started with the guarding of His heart. How can we begin to overcome our sinful nature? In the very same way.

- John O. Reid

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

[Conscience \(Part 1\)](#)

by John W. Ritenbaugh

Human nature will degenerate as far as it is allowed. It has the tendency to quickly adapt to its environment, adjusting effortlessly to immorality and perversion. The conscience — the response of man's moral awareness to the divine revelation concerning himself, his attitudes, and his activities, restraining and permitting behavior (Romans 2:14) — is a function of a person's education, not instinctual. False doctrine causes a person to corrupt his conscience, making him tolerate and accept immorality. The conscience will automatically slide into the gutter (becoming hardened or addicted to sin) if God is not retained in our thoughts. Conversely, if the heart accepts the truth, the conscience will follow suit. After we are converted and transfer our allegiance from the flesh to the spirit, the conscience (with feelings

subordinated to rationality) gradually becomes tender, adjusting to God's standards.

From the Archives: Featured Article

[Playing With Fire](#)

by John O. Reid

Solomon uses the analogy of burning oneself to describe sinning, which is particularly apt in describing the pain and scars left by sexual sins. Fulfilling our desires outside the bounds of what God allows is playing with fire: The sexually immoral must deal with perverse thinking, hurt, distrust, and betrayal, not to mention sexual diseases. John Reid explains.

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