

Guard Your Heart

Michael J. Wilkins

Well, it is a privilege for me to be here and to have Wendy to join me today. We're getting ready for Torrey, so the question that I would ask to start with this is how is your heart. How's your heart right now?

The conference theme is going to be on habits of the heart. But the theme verse is, "Above all else, guard your heart." Why should you guard your heart? Guarding your heart is absolutely crucial, because you never know what's going to come along. If you're not ready, your heart might be stolen, your heart might be broken; or tragically, Your heart may become hardened. And where your heart goes, so goes the rest of your life.

My wife and I were talking a few weeks ago, and during our conversation she leaned over and she tapped me on the chest. And she said, "Mike," No, she said, "Wilk," as she calls me, "Wilkie, you're getting a hard heart." My immediate thought was me? Never! Impossible! I'm a Biola Prof. How could I ever have a hard heart? That's impossible. But what she meant was this. We'd been under some pretty intense pressure, and I was resentful of some people who are supposed to be helping us. But they were ignoring their responsibilities, which made it that much harder for us. Before long, I began to get angry and resentful and vengeful. I was gonna get back at those people, cause nobody messes with my family.

It was a little thing that I didn't see what it was doing to me. My heart was getting hard. And it was affecting my entire life. See, our heart gets hard in one of two ways. When we try to protect

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ourselves from the outside world, our heart gets hard. That's what my wife saw. We won't allow people take advantage of us or hurt us so we harden our heart.

How many of you in here have ever been hurt by another person? Raise your hand. Yeah, I dare say everybody in here could raise your hand at that one. Now what did you do? Get back? Get even? Hurt them? All of those reactions may be understandable, but they can lead to a hard heart.

The typical reaction is to harden our heart to protect ourselves. No one's gonna hurt me again. And so I hardened my heart. But that kind of a heart can't receive love either, and it can't give love. So we become angry, bitter, arrogant and hurtful people.

The second way our heart gets hard is when we say "no" to God. I want my way, which may not be God's way. And so I hardened my heart against Him to do what I want to do, instead of what God wants to do. Any time we reject what God wants us to do, we begin to harden our heart.

It is, so, very extremely important for us to know how to avoid a hard heart. You never know when circumstances will come along that will test your heart, to see how it's really doing. And it's usually in some small way, and a brief moment in time, that tests what our heart is really all about. And where our heart goes, there goes the rest of our life.

Let me give you an example. I grew up with two brothers. Bill was two years older than me, and Tim was two years younger than me. Three of us were the best friends, and thought that we were pretty much typical though we lived in what now they would describe as a dysfunctional family.

We just thought we were kind of messed up. But in each of our lives, in one brief moment with one small incident, our lives were changed forever.

It's started with me. I was a junior in high school. Pretty good student, pretty good athlete, I had made the starting team in my junior year both offensively and defensively in our school football team. It was a third game of the season, and the opening kickoff of the second half, and I took the kickoff. I was having a good year. I was having a good game. And so I, as I gathered in, that kickoff I took off down the field. And I had moves. I avoided one tackler. I stiff-armed another tackler. And I gathered two blockers in front of me, and I took off down the field. I could see the end zone. And just after I crossed midfield, a guy came flying out of nowhere, head first, right at me. And his helmet hit me right here, the side of my face, just below my chin strap. That's the last thing I remember.

When I woke up, what I could sense more than anything else was that my lower teeth on this right side were right in the middle of the upper part of my mouth. I had suffered a severe fractured jaw. And they carried me off the field on a stretcher, and the stands were standing and applauding, and I couldn't even hear them. They took me to the hospital, and they did surgery, and they had to wire my teeth shut together for six weeks.

One little thing made the difference at one unexpected moment in my young sixteen-year-old life, my mouthpiece. I didn't have my mouth clamped down. Instead I was huffing and puffing, going down that field. And so when I hit, my jaw gave way. And my life changed. I look back

now at that one small moment in time that resulted in a major change in my life. But at the time, I didn't even see it. How did my life change? I met a young lady.

And instead of football, instead of school, instead of my young dreams, that young lady stole my heart. She came to the hospital after my surgery. She stayed by my side. She took care of me during my weeks of recovery, and I fell in love with her. They call it puppy love. Unh-unh, I call it mad dog love. I couldn't think straight, I couldn't sleep at night without dreaming ever. And for the next year, I gave up everything for, for her. I didn't go back to football, I gave up on school, I ended up graduating from high school with a rousing GPA of 1.6. I couldn't even get into college.

And then she started messing around with another guy. So what did I do? I went to the army, I went to Vietnam. And there my life went to the bottom of the emotional and psychological heap. I began to live in the pit of drugs and alcohol and sex. And it was there in the pit that God had to attack my heart to claim it. So that I eventually had nowhere else to go, but to Him. It's only by the grace of God that I can stand here today. I should either be dead, or in jail, or crazy. I wasn't prepared. So I went looking for love in all the wrong places, and my heart became hard until God broke through. The question today is who owns your heart.

My younger brother Tim was next. When he was 16 also, he got his license and he was out driving with a couple of friends around town. We lived in Huntington Beach of the time. But that was 1967, and Huntington was just a little town, hardly any stop lights, not much traffic. Long stretches of town, where you could get up some speed. And Tim was driving, not long after he

got his license. It was dark. He went flying through an intersection. And he didn't see the other car coming, and he hit it broadside. It was a horrendous crash. Tim and the other two guys in his car were all right physically, but the passenger in the other car was pinned in. The police and emergency people finally arrived, got him into the car into the hospital, but it was too late. He died on the way to the hospital. He was only 18 years old.

Tim wasn't hurt physically, but Tim was never the same. He was convicted of manslaughter. He was on probation till he was twenty-five. He later himself went into law to specialize in helping kids who got into trouble, and he became what is today a very successful lawyer. But he has lived with the side of that young kid, who died that night in the crash. Even just a couple of years ago, Tim had a complete nervous breakdown.

One little thing made the difference. A stop sign. One little stop sign. One that he had seen dozens of times, but this time for whatever reason, Tim didn't see it. And he didn't stop. He just kept on going. And for that one moment in time, his life was changed forever. A sadness came over Tim, because I really think that that night in that young 16 year old, his heart was broken by the tragedy, and by the horror that came about, because he missed one stop sign.

You never know what's coming in your life, in the small incidents, in the little moments of life. That's why it's so important to guard your heart, cause God try to put some stop signs in your life. Have you seen them?

Bill, my older brother, he was next. Bill was the best looking, the most articulate, the funniest, the most sincere and lovable of the three of us boys. Whenever we get into trouble, Bill will take over. And he got my mom laughing so hard that she forget why we were in trouble. Bill and I went into the army at the same time, but he had a different path. He stayed in the States, and married a wonderful young lady. He and her met in college. Their lives were ideal. Bill became a Christian not long after I did, and we were finishing up college together after we both got out of the army.

But one day, Bill came to me and he said, "Mike, something's wrong. I know everything seems perfect, but I'm not happy. I don't know what it is, but I've got to find out. I just want to be happy." So we went away for a weekend. One little weekend, where we met up with some friends from high school. I don't know all the details of what happened that weekend, but Bill came back a different person. He told his wife Susie that he was leaving. He told me, "Mike, I don't want to be a Christian anymore." And he left to find happiness. He became a homosexual. He immersed himself in a hedonistic, pleasure-seeking lifestyle.

But after more than ten years, Bill called one night to tell me that he needed to see me, because Bill had contracted AIDS. This was in the early 80s when AIDS was just getting known. There was virtually no treatment for it at the time. And Bill died less than two years later. I was with him when he died. We talked about a lot of things. One of the things he said is what a waste his life had been. But just before he passed away, I hugged him, and he said, "Mike, in spite of everything, thanks for loving me, being here."

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In one moment of time and one decision of a lifetime, Bill went looking for happiness. He hardened his heart against his own wife, against God, against all that was right, so that he could find happiness. And the tragedy is that he was looking for the wrong thing and he was looking in all the wrong places. Happiness. We see that? Happiness. But what is it? What is it that you need to be happy? What are the desires of your heart that you would be willing to go to any lengths for?

Three brothers, in one brief moment of time, encountered incidents, forever changed our lives. We weren't prepared. We don't, we didn't know when to stop. And we were looking for happiness in the wrong place. But you know, you are not that much different than what we were.

The real difference is you are far better equipped though to take seriously the condition of your heart, and far better equipped right now to guard your heart. And one primary reason is because you have the privilege to be sitting here, and you have the privilege to be allowed the opportunity to choose how it is that you will guard your heart.

This is, this is one of the greatest times of your lives. This is when you are establishing patterns of life, setting direction for your dreams, developing relationships that will help you set priorities to maintain your values. This is the time to get prepared, to find out about yourself and who you are and what it is that drives you to do what you do. It's hard to imagine it, but this is the time when you are setting the direction of the rest of your life. It's absolutely wonderful for us and the faculty and the staff and the administration to get to share this wonderful time of your lives.

But none of us knows what's coming. Some of the most insignificant incidents, some of the least likely little moments will have enormous consequences. You just don't know what's coming. So how do you guard your heart? How do you try to be prepared? Three simple verses, that have profound implications, that show us how to properly guard our hearts.

The apostle John says, you've heard it too many times, "We love, because He first loved us." 1 John 4:19. The first way of guarding your heart is to simply be prepared.

We all need love. We want love. But where are we looking? I wasn't properly prepared. And when I went down, I went looking for love in the wrong place. And it wasn't love. It was lust. It was selfishness. It was pure immaturity. But once I met Jesus, I went looking for the kind of love that is real. I met the most wonderful woman in the world. And the thing that made the, the real difference in our lives is that our relationship was centered in Jesus Christ. It was right there and nothing else. That's what we built our relationship upon. You can build your relationship upon any number of things. And sometimes, the hardest Christian marriage to develop is by two people who are Christians, but never put Christ there in the center of it.

We've been married now for nearly 30 years. And I would say that now I understand what love is. The best way of preparing your heart is to live in the center of God's love, learn to be loved by God. That is so very important just to open yourself, to know His love, on a moment by moment basis, every day of your life, and not in some weird God-talk mystical way. I get so tired of that. If God is real, and if He is right here as He says He is, is not some kind of a weird encounter. It is you just living life every single day, moment by moment, walking with Jesus. If you live in His

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love, you're not going to go looking for counterfeits, and you will establish the kind of relationship that will love like God's love. Because we love not because we're so loving. We love, because He first loved us.

Jesus says, "These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full." John 15:11. That's the second way of guarding your heart. Know when to stop. Thrill seeking is a rush. We all know that. But guarding our heart is to know when to stop, because you have to know when. Tim was looking for thrills, and wasn't mature enough to know when to stop. There's a lot of stuff that can give us a rush. But you know what it is in your own life that gives you a thrill. But it may be a thrill that's taking you at the wrong direction.

Some of you have friendships that you really need to get out of those friendships. It might even be a person who is a friend that is here with you at Biola. But when you get together, it's taking you both in the wrong direction. You've gotta get out of that. Some of you are developing bad habits. You have to kick now. We must think of the obvious ones, like alcohol or pornography. Those are huge tricks to the devil. But what about your attitude? Cynicism can be just as deadly a thrill. Why? Because it elevates you above others, it removes you from reality by giving you a false sense of power over other people. There are lots of bad habits we can fall into that give us a thrill. But they will harden our heart from God and from His people.

Guard your heart by experiencing the true joy that comes from knowing who you are in Christ, and the deep experience of fellowship with brothers and sisters in the Spirit. Living life the way God intended life to be lived. Guard your heart by knowing when to stop.

And Jesus says further, "Seek first God's kingdom and His righteousness; and all these things," all those things we go looking for, and the right "will be added to you." Matthew 6:33. That's the third way of guarding your heart. Know where to look for happiness. God wants you to be happy, even more than you want to be happy. I know you don't believe that. He has given you all that you are, and He wants you to experience life to the maximum, even more than you may want to.

But there are lots of false ideas of what it means to be happy. Bill had been abused as a kid. He was confused. Bill was like an empty shell, looking for healing and meaning to the chaos of his inner life. So we went looking for happiness in the various lies that the world told to him. Guard your heart by knowing what is real, by knowing what is real about life as God created it, and set as the priority of your everyday life to seek what God says will bring happiness, not what the world says.

Happiness is not out there. Happiness is as close as your next breath. When you simply learn to say on an everyday basis "yes" to God, and practice the presence of Jesus in your lives to show you how to live with Kingdom values.

Torrey's Conference, at this week, we're gonna focus upon what it means to guard our heart. Chapels, and Torrey, conferences like this can seem like a never ending, just plain old routine. And every one of you, but every single one that you attend can equip you to encounter all the

incidents that may soon come your way, incidents that you may never have ever expected would come.

Two students, that I had the privilege of teaching that were here in the middle to late eighties, were an ideal couple. Kevin and Lois, just a beautiful young couple. They got married they-, after they left here. Life looked to be ideal. Good paying jobs. They found a nice home down at San Clemente. They had their first little child, a little boy. Boy, they love this little guy beyond measure. But soon they noticed that he didn't respond to them, like other babies responded to their parents. He was soon diagnosed with severe autism. He would never speak. But that didn't stop them. They formed a support group for parents in our community, none of whom were believers. They became an inspiration to our entire community.

Three years ago, Lois was diagnosed with cancer. They fought that cancer with the same, usual strength of character, and profound joy produced by the Spirit. They thought they had licked it. But three weeks ago, Lois began feeling tired. She called some friends to come and take care of their two little boys. But the doctors put her in the hospital, where the-, where they had discovered that the cancer had developed into brain tumors. Last week, Lois, not barely even into her thirties, went to be with the Lord.

Just another Torrey? I don't think so. You'll never get this chance again, friends. You never know what's coming. Neither did I. Neither did Tim. Neither did Bill. Neither did Kevin or Lois.

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And the difference? How is your heart? Be prepared. Know when to stop. And know where to look for what we might call happiness. I love you. Let's close in prayer.

Father, this isn't just another chapel, just another Torrey. These young people will never have this wonderful privilege again. When they leave these halls, even today, they don't know what's coming. None of us do. And the only difference is how we have guarded our heart.

Father, I pray that you do create in us that pure, clean, sincere heart before you and your people, that just simply lives in the presence of Jesus. May that be our goal. And may our lives then become what life really should be. Give us the courage to guard our hearts. In Jesus name, Amen.