

EDITORIAL: THE WRONG MESSAGES

In today's multi-media age we are bombarded with a myriad of voices, all clamouring to be heard. Advertisers aspire to tell us why our lives will be incomplete and unfulfilled without their product, oft assailing us visually in the process. Politicians vie to convince us why their analysis is correct and their policies astute. Our peers may endeavour to exert influence over us to simply do what everyone else appears to be doing, regardless of whether it is the right thing to do. And exponents of the arts beam the dubious (if not worse) into our theatres, living rooms, cars and personal stereos. These are but a few of the many voices we hear each day. Yet is not too often their message a completely wrong one? A true story I heard recently involving a child's perception of an all-too-typical TV portrayal of 'love' they sadly had witnessed, highlighted just how easily an impressionable mind can pick up a completely wrong message. In John's gospel the devil is described as a liar (Jn 8:44), who not only is out to deceive, but to steal the very best from us. From his dealings with Eve at the dawn of history in the Garden of Eden, one of his chief strategies has been to deceive us into thinking that God is somehow holding out on us. A look at society in many parts of the world today will confirm just how successful his strategy has been, particularly in the area of love and relationships. The message emanating from the writers of dramas, films and teen magazines is in direct opposition to the biblical standard of a person keeping themselves pure for that special person to whom they would commit their lives through marriage. In an age where we are bombarded with such a profusion of non-biblical messages, what should we, as Christians, do? In this Editorial I would like to suggest five appropriate responses.

We need to **GUARD OUR EYES**. In 21st century Britain, where boundaries are constantly being challenged and pushed back, no one need scan the top shelves in a newsagent or watch late night TV to be assaulted with suggestive images. From cars to fragrances, advertisers know their products are more likely to be noticed and appear desirable through the use of such means. Yet what is generally accepted as being the oldest book in the ever up-to-date Bible has wise counsel on this seemingly modern day problem – "I made a covenant with mine eyes; why then should I think upon a maid?" (Job 31:1) "Covenant" signifies a legally binding agreement, with solemn obligations placed upon both signatories. Job had thus covenanted between his eyes and his heart that he would not gaze inappropriately on women. Without such looks there is less opportunity for the wrong type of thoughts, which can give birth to actions. Whilst Job is speaking to himself as a man, his counsel has equal validity for both sexes. We need to discipline our eyes, and, as John Bunyan spoke of, to guard the "eye gate".

We need to **GUARD OUR MINDS**. Someone has wisely said "Sow a thought, reap an action. Sow an action, reap a habit. Sow a habit, reap a destiny. Sow a destiny, reap an eternity." How vital, therefore, that we cultivate the right kind of thoughts. "For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he ..." (Prov 23:7) The things we chiefly think about are a truer reflection of what we really are than our outward actions before others. Pure thoughts are likely to lead to pure actions, and vice versa. We tend to move in the direction of our dominant thoughts. We naturally act on what fills our minds, and, when we become preoccupied with a thought, eventually we want to act on it. But, if what our thoughts tell us about ourselves causes us to blush, it is high time to have our minds renewed by God's word. And Paul gives us just the template for action – whatever things are true, honest, just, pure, lovely, of good report; of virtue, and praiseworthy, think on these things (Phil 4:8).

We need to **GUARD OUR HEARTS**. Whilst the human brain is the seat of the intellect, the heart is, of course, the seat of our affections and emotions, and what conflict can arise between the two. The Steve Green song “Guard Your Heart”, whilst geared at married people, yet has eloquent counsel for all – “What appears to be a harmless glance / Can turn to romance / And homes are divided / Feelings that should never have been / Awaken within / Tearing the heart in two / Listen, I beg of you! - Chorus: Guard your heart, Guard your heart / Don't trade it for treasure / Don't give it away / Guard your heart, Guard your heart / As a payment for pleasure, It's a high price to pay. / For a soul that remains sincere, with a conscience clear / Guard your heart.” Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived, gave this sound advice – “Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life.” (Prov 4:23) “Keep thy heart” suggests robustly guarding our affections. In what way? - with ALL diligence. Why? - for out of the heart spring forth the issues that affect all areas of wellbeing in our lives.

We need to **GUARD OUR CHILDREN**. All who know the joy and responsibility of parenthood will surely agree that our children are the most precious possession God entrusts us with. Do we take care, through our words and actions, through the papers and magazines we buy, through the music we listen to, the programmes we view, and the places to go, that we do not send out any wrong messages to our children, who may view our choices as tacit approval by us of things that may be questionable or worse? Do we caution our children of the wrong messages that certain styles of dress and appearance may send out, and of the potential consequences of such? Do we counteract the prevailing wisdom of our times on love and courtship with a balanced, biblical perspective? And do we pray for and strive to arm our children against the ultimate wrong message - the “other gospel” that the Apostle Paul spoke of (Gal 1:8) - the message that there is a way to heaven through something or someone other than by grace alone, through faith alone, in Jesus Christ alone (Jn 14:6; Eph 2:8-9)?

We need to **GUARD OUR TESTIMONIES**. A little verse says “You’re writing a Bible, a chapter each day / By the deeds that you do, and the words that you say / Men read what you write, whether faithless or true / Say, what is the gospel according to you?” As Christians we are scrutinised each day by people who often are looking for reasons *not* to believe in Jesus. How we need, therefore, to guard our testimonies, and never to become too proud to think that we could ever fall and become a stumbling block to others seeking Christ. “Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall.” (1 Cor 10:12) Three times in David’s lament for Saul in 2 Samuel 1 we read the words “How are the mighty fallen!” (vs 19, 25 & 27) David, Israel’s greatest king, was described as “a man after God’s own heart”. Yet just ten chapters later we read of his sin with Bathsheba, and its terrible aftermath. In challenging him, the prophet Nathan spoke these telling words “By this deed thou hast given great occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme ...” (2 Sam 12:14) David would repent (Ps 32 & 51), be forgiven, and be fully restored. The blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin. But what he had done could never be undone. Our actions reflect on the Lord we love - for good or ill. “You and I were created to tell the truth about God by reflecting His likeness ... How many lies have you told about God today?” Contrast David with Joseph. When faced with temptation at the hand of Potiphar’s wife, he took to his heels and fled. He passed the test, and, though falsely accused and imprisoned, God ultimately vindicated and exalted him. “For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning.” (Rom 15:4) Let us be constantly watchful, emulate godly Joseph, and always flee from doing wrong (Prov 1:10 & 15)