

# ANDY STANLEY



ENEMIES

*of the*

HEART

Excerpted from *Enemies of the Heart:  
Breaking Free from the Four Emotions That Control You*

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# For Your Children's Best

I have a friend who, from all outward appearances, is a picture of health. He's in great shape. He eats right, exercises, and doesn't smoke or drink. He's never had any heart problems. In spite of all that, he spends half a day every year with his cardiologist, undergoing a rigorous battery of tests. Why? Because his father died of a heart attack in his forties. My buddy was told then that he would always have a propensity toward heart disease. So he keeps a tight reign on his lifestyle, and he sees his doctor regularly. It's certainly not his fault that his heart isn't as strong as the average person's. But regardless, he's responsible for his health.

Then during one particular visit to the cardiologist, as my friend was being wired up for another grueling session on the treadmill, something occurred to him: Just as he was predisposed to heart disease because of heredity, his children would likely be cursed with the same weakness. At the time, his kids were still young. But regardless, my friend suddenly felt another layer of responsibility settle over him as he started his fifteen-minute run to nowhere.

## The Handoff

I read somewhere that approximately 50 percent of all heart problems can be attributed to genetics, and about the same percentage to environmental factors. I don't know how those percentages break down when it comes to our spiritual hearts, but I do know that heredity and environment both play a role.

For example, my oldest son, Andrew, processes life exactly as I do. My sister-in-law jokes that her son comes by his overly inquisitive mind honestly—she was the same way as a kid. “Like father, like son” isn't just a cliché; there's a lot of truth there. Every once in a while I'll respond to something in a way that causes my wife, Sandra, to smile and say, “Is that right, Charles?” (a reference to my dad). I know I have his hands, but apparently I've got more of him in me than I'm aware. And for the most part, that's a good thing. But every once in a while I'll hear myself say something and think, *That's something my dad would say.*

Both of my sons are already wearing contact lenses, thanks to me. But what else will they struggle with because of me? And more importantly, what can I do to prepare them for those eventualities? My wife is perfect. I think my daughter may be as well. But what can I do to protect her pure heart? What do I need to teach her to enable her to guard it herself in the future?

Our kids share more than our physical genes. They may also share our propensities toward anger, guilt, greed, and jealousy. Clearly, we have the capacity to pass along the seeds of spiritual corruption, so our

children are among the primary reasons *we* need to tackle these issues head-on in our own lives. The fact is, the four heart conditions we've been discussing shape the climate of our homes, which ultimately plays a large role in shaping the hearts of our children.

Guilt has an interesting and potentially harmful way of trickling from the front seat to the backseat of the SUV. A parent with secrets or a secret life will not create an environment of openness in the home. There will always be things that are never talked about. That kid on the Little League baseball team who blows his top when things don't go his way is usually related to the dad in the stands who's prone to go off on the sixteen-year-old umpire. A father with an anger problem will create rage in the hearts of his children through his own incessant overreactions. A mom who's continually talking about what she doesn't have in comparison to others will create that same sense of unhealthy discontentment within her own daughter.

Home environments mirror the hearts of those who head the home. If you can't see this in your current situation, just think back to your family of childhood. You can probably trace some of your current heart-related struggles back to that home environment.

When it comes to shaping our children's hearts, modeling will always win out over instruction. I heard a guy at a restaurant yell at his daughter, "Teresa, don't raise your voice to your mother!" I saw the humor in it, but Teresa didn't think it was too funny. She shot right back at him, "I'm not raising my voice!"

Kids raise their voices because they hear us do it. Kids will open up if they see us opening up, even if it means we're opening fire. But

our kids will be less defensive if they see us dropping our defenses. They learn to manage their hearts by watching us.

Not long ago I noticed how our kids tend to take responsibility for their mistakes. Saying “I’m sorry” or “That was my fault” comes naturally to them. I commented on this to Sandra. I said, “Have you noticed how quick our kids are to take responsibility when they do something wrong? I don’t think I ever said, ‘That was my fault’ when I was their age.”

Sandra smiled and said, “Do you know why it’s easy for them to say, ‘That was my fault?’” I had no idea. She said, “Because they hear *you* say it all the time.” We both laughed, but she was right. I do say it a lot. And consequently, so do they.

### **Moving On from Here**

We cannot control everything our children experience, but we can influence how they process what life sends their way. We can teach them how to guard their hearts against the inevitable firestorms of life. No one impacts the health of a child’s heart like Mom and Dad. Intentionally or unintentionally, on purpose or by accident, we build into our children or take away. This may be our greatest responsibility as parents.

Academics are important, but I haven’t met too many adults who trace their problems back to where they went to school or what their GPA was. The men and women I’ve counseled who were teetering on the brink of disaster, relationally or financially, were all dealing with

heart problems: Their anger had finally caused irreparable damage to their careers; or their greed had taken its toll on their finances; or their jealousy had driven a wedge in their marriages. These men and women had failed to stand watch over their hearts. They weren't in the habit of investing in *the* thing that made *the* most difference in *the* most critical components of life.

The question I must wrestle with as a parent is, When my kids pack their cars and leave home for the last time, what will be packed away in their hearts? And what can I do now to prepare them for the day when their hearts are totally their responsibility? I'm so intentional about so many things involving my kids. Education, sports, music lessons, SAT preparation, even church attendance. Still, I'm convinced that at the end of the day they have the potential to be experience-rich yet unprepared for what life will throw at their hearts. If you're a parent, I'm sure you can identify with my concerns.

So what do we do? Other than do all we can to get our own hearts in shape, what can we do to infuse health into the hearts of our children? For starters we can teach them the importance of confession, forgiveness, and generosity. We can teach them to celebrate the successes of others. We can pray. We can model good habits. We can make sure they're in church. We can look for teachable moments. All of those things are important. And when applied consistently, I'm convinced they make a huge difference. But I would like to suggest one other thing that I believe adds a critical element of intentionality to the entire process: It's an exercise that may help our children learn to pay attention to what's going on *within*.



## Standing Guard

One of the first verses I memorized as a kid was Proverbs 4:23. It wasn't my idea. My dad suggested it. And it proved to be another in a long list of good suggestions. Here it is:

Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life. (NASB)

Some translations say “guard your heart.” Either way, the meaning is clear: We're to pay attention to what's going on in our hearts. Why? Because, as the author suggests, each of us lives from the heart. And the health of your heart will be reflected in the quality of your life.

Like most kids, I was totally enthralled with what was going on around me, but I hadn't given a moment's thought to what was going on *inside* me. But this verse, along with my father's commentary, awakened me to the importance of monitoring what was rattling around in my heart.

Fast-forward twenty-five years. One night I was sitting on the edge of my son's bed, having one of those moments that every engaged parent lives for. We were talking about the events of the day. Without thinking much about it, I put my hand on his chest and said, “Andrew, is everything okay in your heart?” As soon as I said it I thought, *Lighten up, Dad. He's eight. He doesn't have a clue what you are asking.*

But he paused, smiled, and said, “Yes sir, Daddy.”

That began a weekly, sometimes biweekly habit that I continued for years. Andrew is eighteen now. He's two inches taller than I am.

Just for fun I occasionally put my arm around his shoulder, place my hand over his heart, and start into my question. Before I can finish it, he smiles and says, “Yes sir.”

### **The Value of a Question**

The questions you ask your children communicate to them what’s important to you. The questions you repeatedly ask communicate what’s *most* important to you in life.

How many times do you suppose your parents asked the following questions when you were growing up: “Did you brush your teeth?” “Did you do your homework?” “Did you finish your chores?” “Did you clean your room?” “How did you do on your test?” “Did you thank her?” “What time did you come in last night?” We knew from these questions what was important to our parents. After a while we knew what they were going to ask before they asked it. There was no point in asking if I could turn on the television on a school night if I hadn’t done my homework. I knew that as soon as I asked about TV, my mom would ask about my homework. Anticipating my parents’ questions shaped my behavior.

For most of us, the questions our parents asked revolved around our behavior, our performance. If you’re like most adults, I bet you can’t think of a single question your mom or dad repeatedly asked that caused you to stop and give thought to what was going on inside you. Consequently, we were never taught to pay attention to, much less guard, our hearts. We were taught, instead, to monitor our behavior. And there’s certainly nothing wrong with that, except, as we’ve

seen throughout this book, our hearts would eventually drive our behavior.

Imagine how different your life might be if your parents had instead directed your attention to what was going on inside your heart.

### **Retooling**

I'm convinced that one of the best ways to train our children to guard their hearts is through asking questions. Our questions have the power to do two things. First, they can communicate the value we place on the condition of their hearts. But more importantly, our questions can actually help our children know what they should be watching for. In time, our questions will become the gauge by which our children measure their hearts.

As my kids got older, I added a few questions to my weekly bedtime routine. One at a time, I sit on the edge of their beds and work through my list.

“Is everything okay in your heart?”

“Are you mad at anybody?”

“Did anybody hurt your feelings today?”

“Did anybody break a promise to you today?”

“Is there anything you need to tell me?”

“Are you worried about anything?”

I ask about broken promises because I'm usually the culprit. If they think I've promised something and didn't follow through, I want them to talk about it, not sleep on it. I want my kids to learn how to clean out their hearts every day for the rest of their lives.

When Allie was about nine, I asked her, “Whose failure would you secretly celebrate?” To be honest, I really wasn’t sure if she would even understand the question. But her response shocked me. She immediately blurted out a name! Fortunately, it wasn’t one of her brothers. But it was one of their friends.

I said, “Allie, do you even know what that question means?”

She said, “Yes sir. It means if they didn’t do good at something, you would be happy about it.”

As you might imagine, we had a nice little chat before she went to sleep that night. It turns out she had something lodged in her heart that we needed to get unlodged. I’ve since added that question to my repertoire.

### **Dinnertime Confession**

The biggest payoff from all this heart talk came unexpectedly. As we were finishing dinner one night, I mentioned briefly that a friend of the family was sick again and that I thought his physical challenges were caused by “deeper” issues. Andrew latched right on to that.

“What deeper issues?” he asked.

This was someone they all knew, so I felt a little funny about continuing the conversation. But since I’m always in search of a teachable moment, I forged ahead anyway. For the next few minutes, I explained the relationship between our physical health and the health of our hearts. I talked specifically about the danger of harboring secrets and how secrets can make you sick. Everybody seemed interested, so I kept going. I talked about how an incident in childhood could affect an

adult later in life and how oftentimes the adult doesn't even remember the incident but is still affected. Then I made my application. "This is why it's so important to confess our sins. Confession keeps us from having unhealthy secrets stuck in our hearts."

I'd barely gotten the last sentence out of my mouth when Garrett, who was nine at the time, said he needed to tell me something.

I said, "Okay."

He said, "Not here, Dad." Then he got up from the table and headed down the hall. I followed. When we were out of earshot from the rest of the family, Garrett proceeded to tell me about an incident that happened at a neighbor's house.

"When did this happen?" I asked.

"A long time ago," he replied.

I thanked him for telling me, hugged him, and told him how proud I was that he'd emptied his heart. Then we went back to the dinner table.

Twenty minutes later, as Sandra and I were clearing the table, Garrett came into the kitchen and said, "Mom, can I talk to you for a minute?" She followed him down the hall and listened as he confessed the rest of the incident that he'd only partially confessed to me. She hugged him and told him how proud she was of his desire to clean out his heart. Back in the kitchen, we both commented on how great it was that he was learning the importance of confession at such a young age. Little did we know...

At bedtime, that same night, Garrett asked if he could speak to Sandra alone. Once I left the room, he proceeded to confess another

incident he'd been feeling guilty about. This one wasn't quite as severe as the first.

An hour later, Sandra and I were working in our office and we heard the pitter-patter of little feet coming down the hall. It was Garrett. "I feel like I need to tell you guys something, but I don't know what it is." I told him to go back to bed and when it was clear to come back down and tell us.

A few minutes later he was back. "Dad," he said, "I remember what it was." I followed him back down the hall and listened as he told me about yet another incident that we didn't know about.

At ten thirty Sandra and I were lying in bed, chuckling about Garrett's evening of confession, when once again we heard footsteps in the hall. It was Garrett. He came over to my side of the bed. It took everything in me not to say, "What else?" But I refrained.

"Mom, Dad," he said, "yesterday when Allie wasn't here I went into her room without asking." I knew we'd finally reached the bottom of the confession barrel. He'd scraped up every unconfessed sin he could come up with. Once again, I thanked him for his honesty. I assured him that God would honor his willingness to confess. Garrett peered at us through the dark and said, "I just don't want to get sick."

Now I know that sounds like a made-up preacher story, but that's just the way it happened. And I still haven't told you the best part. The next night, when we were saying our prayers with Garrett, he went through his normal prayer routine, but just before he said, "Amen," he paused and added, "And thank you that I have a clean heart."

## Imagine

What if we were all equally committed to scrubbing our hearts clean? Imagine what would happen if we made up our minds to never let the sun set on our anger, our greed, our jealousy, or our guilt. What if we guarded our hearts with the same diligence we use to guard our homes? And why not? After all, we know, we've seen, we've experienced what happens when a heart goes unattended. We've all felt the aftershock of anger, guilt, greed, and jealousy. We should wake up every day of our lives with an eye on the gauges of our hearts.

But better yet, imagine a generation of children who grow up attuned not only to what's happening around them but inside of them as well. Imagine your children growing up with an extraordinary sensitivity to the rhythms of their hearts. I don't have to tell you the difference that would make in their lives. You know the difference it would have made for you. Now you have an opportunity to do for your children what perhaps your parents didn't know how to do for you.

As adults, we've been instructed to guard our hearts with all diligence. As parents, we've been given the responsibility to teach our kids to guard theirs. If the heart of your child is important to you, ask your child about what's going on in there. Teach your child to confess, forgive, give generously, and celebrate the successes of others. These are the habits that keep a heart free from painful clutter. These are habits that will enable your child to develop a healthy adult relationship with you in the future. These are the habits that change everything.



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