

# The Place of Grace

By Amy Wallace

Imagine with me for a minute. Picture your favorite stuffed animal ~ one you loved all the fur off of when you were little or one you've seen somewhere and longed to hold. Mine's an adorable black bear cub with soft fur and chocolate eyes that fits perfectly in my arms for a hug. Once you have a picture of whatever your favorite stuffed animal would be, pretend it's your heart, something very near and dear to you. How would you treat it?

Would you hold it close to you and protect it?

Would you toss it across the room for someone else to play with?

Would you hand it over to a good friend?

Would you hide it away so no one could see it?

What do you think Jesus tells us to do with our stuffed animal heart? Give it away? Nope. In fact He says the opposite: "Guard your heart for it affects everything you do." (Proverbs 4:23)

Guard your heart. Take personal responsibility for taking care of your heart because it affects everything you do. Protect your teddy bear.

All too often we hear that we're to give ourselves away for the sake of the gospel because we have so much truth and people need us to show them the light. Maybe you've interpreted that like I did and felt guilty because what you had to give was never enough. Here's what I thought that meant using my teddy bear as an example of how I handled my heart:

People saw my teddy bear, thought it was adorable, and wanted to hold onto it to help them through a tough spot. So because God made me with a deep desire to share the truth and a sensitive heart that longed to help, I allowed people to borrow my bear for a while. It felt good to know I could help; I could comfort those in need. The problem came when I wanted my bear back, when I felt a little tired and needed to rest. But I'd let go of it and the other person became dependent on it to make them feel okay. And I became dependent on them taking care of my bear. So what did I do?

I listened to religious sounding words that told me to pour myself out without showing me how get filled. I listened to guilt inducing words that told me I had so much to give I shouldn't have needs of my own. And if I did, I was selfish. So I let others smother all the fur off my bear. Then they threw it back to me and wanted me to fix it and give it back to them.

So I had a tattered and torn teddy bear and nowhere to go to get it fixed. I thought God wanted me to keep giving myself away and I was hurt that when I did, it didn't really help others much and it depleted what little I had. Others

needs and my needs were a bottomless well that I felt guilty for not being able to fill.

Then I heard an interesting word of truth. Yes, the Bible does tell us to be poured out like a drink offering, to give and it will be given to us, to comfort those in need, to consider others better than ourselves. But the truth that's so often not given at the same time is that I can't do any of those things unless I am perfect like Christ. (Matthew 5:48)

In the Greek perfect means "complete." Not the highest standard of having all our ducks in a nice religious row like doing thirty-minute quiet times every day, never gossiping, never swearing, and praying all the time.

In other words, I'm to give only after I'm complete. But I'm left with an impossible situation if I don't know how to get complete. All I've heard on how to get there are nebulous words like "be perfect" "be filled with the Spirit" "rest in the Vine" "depend on Jesus to live His life through you."

Maybe I'm slow. Because I thought I was doing those things, but it never worked. I prayed more, served more, read more, woke up earlier to do even more quiet time, and all I felt was exhausted.

Remember my tattered teddy bear heart? The one full of guilt for not being enough? Here's what I've learned: It's not enough.

Doesn't that feel better?

No, it didn't to me either. Not until I heard the rest of what my Heavenly Daddy was saying. Before being poured out, giving myself away, and putting others first, I had to take care of myself (Philippians 2:4) by finding my completeness in Him. To do that, I had to go back to the two greatest commandments. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: Love your neighbor as yourself." (Mark 12:30-31)

The first of the two greatest commands says to love God. Love Him by obeying His command to "Come to me all you who are weary." Love God by spending time with Him and taking care of someone He values with His life~ YOU.

What does that look like?

It looks like curling up with my teddy bear and spending time in the Father's arms.

That means always holding onto my teddy bear and protecting it~ taking personal responsibility for its care and not hoping others will do it. In other words, stop trying to get a guy's attention thinking his approval will mean you are pretty. You're throwing your teddy bear heart to him. What if he drops it? What about running to your best friend(s) at the first sign of a problem and hoping they'll tell you how to figure it out? Again, you're throwing your bear to them to take care of instead of protecting your heart and taking care of it yourself.

A big part of taking personal responsibility for your heart is taking your tattered teddy bear to God and letting all the memories and pain out and paying attention to the messages the enemy scribbled onto your heart through the pain. Ask God what's written there and listen to what He says.

Then let God replace the lies with His truth. He has so much good to say about you.

In other words, spend time with God to get filled, complete and then spend time with God to stay full and complete.

In your emotions: get information from your feelings, listen to your heart.

In your spirit: hang out with God and listen to His words of love about you.

In your mind: feed it with healthy things.

And in your body: rest, exercise, and eat well.

Please remember God will not speak in contradiction to His Word. Anything you hear God speak to you about what He thinks of you or how you are to get filled will be there, in principle or in actual verses, in the Bible. If you are unsure, check out what you're hearing with a parent or trusted adult. Even if you're sure, it's a good thing to seek godly counsel before you head out in a new direction.

Talk and listen to Him, enjoy His creation, listen to music that inspires you, read books that draw you closer to God, play, laugh, exercise, eat healthy; spend some time doing whatever fills you. Then you'll have something to give. Then you can love others as you love yourself because you've spent time letting your Heavenly Daddy love you. "We love because He first loved us."

Getting filled by God, taking care of your teddy bear heart, is the best gift you can give.

Jesus did it. (Luke 5:16; John 12:36)

You can too. (Romans 15:13; 2 Corinthians 1:3-4)

When you do, your teddy bear heart will be a place where grace abounds.

And it will draw others to God like your Heavenly Daddy draws you.

Look up Proverbs 4:23 and write it out:

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What does it mean to, “Above all else, guard your heart?”

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Look up Luke 5:16 & John 12:36. How did Jesus guard His heart?

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