

# Guard the Heart

WISDOM FROM DAD • PROVERBS 4:20-27 • PART 3

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If you have been with us over the past few weeks, then you might remember that we have been looking together at the words of King Solomon in Proverbs 4. Two weeks ago, we had the backwards sermon, where we started at the end of the passage and looked at the benefits of wisdom, then we looked at where we get wisdom (it is often passed along to us from previous generations), and then we closed with the command (that came at the beginning), that we are to get wisdom - this is an intentional quest. Wisdom is something we need to be actively pursuing. And then we had some practical applications.

Last week we looked at the fact that Proverbs is a very practical book, and we learned that once we get wisdom, we must then stay on the path, no matter what. We learned that life is full of choices, and many times, we have a very clear choice between the way of wisdom and the path of wickedness. The way of wisdom leads to freedom, but the path of wickedness leads to destruction, and there are many who will try to influence us to go down that path. We learned that both paths are progressive, and we made a contrast between a sunrise and a sunset. Like a sunrise, the way of wisdom gets brighter and brighter, but like a sunset, the way of wickedness gets darker and darker until we wander off into darkness completely. We then closed with the words of Jesus as he reminded us in Matthew 7 to, ***“Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it.”***

This morning, we come to the last paragraph in Proverbs 4 with a reminder from King Solomon that we are to guard the heart. As we live this life, we are to protect the heart. I know this might be a bit distracting, so I will turn it off in just a moment, but the animation up here was made by someone known online as “Doc Jana,” who is apparently a medical doctor in India who likes to dabble in animation. His website explains that he is a believer in God and that he loves to create animations of various parts of human anatomy. He then provides these animations at no cost to anybody who might be interested.

The human heart is one of the most amazing parts of the human body. It was designed by God to pump blood continually, from about 5 weeks after conception, continuing uninterrupted for a lifetime. I say “lifetime,” because if it ever stops, that is your lifetime! So, your heart will beat for a lifetime! Normally, the heart will beat continually for many decades. The human heart is about the size of a fist, weighs less than a pound, and pumps 115,000 times every day to circulate the equivalent of 2,000 gallons of blood through the human body

on a daily basis. The average heart will beat nearly 3 billion times in a lifetime, usually somewhere between 60-80 beats per minute. Most of us understand how important it is to take care of the heart. We don't always do what we know we should do, but we know the importance of getting exercise and eating the right foods. We know the dangers posed by smoking and a sedentary lifestyle. Most of us get our blood tested on a regular basis, and then we adjust our behavior to try to keep the heart running for as long as possible. This week, I had some walnuts and avocados - not because I am particularly fond of those things, but because my doctor said that I needed these things.

However, in this last paragraph in Proverbs 4, Solomon is not talking about the literal heart. As we know, the heart is often used as a picture of who we are, and it's used this way at least 75 times in the book of Proverbs. And we refer to the heart in the same way today. We often speak of the heart symbolically. When we use a heart emoji, we aren't usually referring to the muscle that contracts a hundred thousand times a day. And by the way, when I refer to "us" using a heart emoji, I'm not referring to myself personally. If you ever see me using a heart emoji, that's my secret signal letting you know I've been taken hostage. Some of you, though, might actually use a heart emoji. But the point is: The heart is often used to picture something symbolically. The heart represents who we are. And so, in just a moment, when we see King Solomon tell his sons to guard, or protect, or keep their hearts, he's telling them to protect who they are on the inside. Soldiers and cops will often wear some kind of protection over the heart. What they do literally, King Solomon is telling his sons to do spiritually. Guard the heart!

Why is it so important to protect the heart? Well, in just a moment, we'll notice how Solomon gives the reason. He says (in verse 23), ***"Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life."*** The heart, then, is the source of life, and here he compares it to a spring. We think of the importance of keeping our water supply clean. Here in Madison we are blessed with some good water. But we have had some issues. Right now, at least one of our municipal wells here on the east side is shut down due to contamination. And so, if I have bad water coming into my home from the source, it does no good for me to mess with the plumbing. We need to fix the source. The heart is that source. And so, if our lives are filled with evil behavior, we need to look at where that behavior is coming from. As Jeremiah said in Jeremiah 17:9, ***"The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?"*** King Solomon, then, is about to warn his sons that they need to be extremely careful to protect the source, to make sure that the spring (so to speak) does not get contaminated.

I think of the years I spent developing film and printing photographs in the darkroom. I can safely say that I spent much of my college career in the dark. Literally. But very early on I learned a valuable and very basic principle in a science lab, something that applied in the darkroom, and that is: When dealing with chemicals in a lab, you never contaminate the source. If I need this chemical, then I need some procedures in place to make sure that the label on the container accurately matches what is actually in the container. And so, I can't be introducing contaminants into that container. I can't just grab some crusty old scoop off the shelf to dip into the source, but I need to protect it. And this seems to be what Solomon is saying about the heart. Protect it as you would protect your drinking water. Do not let the heart get contaminated. So, with this in mind, let's look together at Proverbs 4:20-27, the words of King Solomon about protecting the heart, and let's notice the advice he gives - Proverbs 4:20-27,

<sup>20</sup> ***My son, give attention to my words;  
Incline your ear to my sayings.***

<sup>21</sup> ***Do not let them depart from your sight;***

- Keep them in the midst of your heart.*  
<sup>22</sup> *For they are life to those who find them*  
*And health to all their body.*  
<sup>23</sup> *Watch over your heart with all diligence,*  
*For from it flow the springs of life.*  
<sup>24</sup> *Put away from you a deceitful mouth*  
*And put devious speech far from you.*  
<sup>25</sup> *Let your eyes look directly ahead*  
*And let your gaze be fixed straight in front of you.*  
<sup>26</sup> *Watch the path of your feet*  
*And all your ways will be established.*  
<sup>27</sup> *Do not turn to the right nor to the left;*  
*Turn your foot from evil.*

As we come to the end of Proverbs 4 and as we look at King Solomon's advice to his sons, telling them to protect their hearts, I want us to notice how he uses four other parts of the body to illustrate this. Solomon makes it so simple.

I. And we start in verse 20 as he refers to the EARS.

***"My son, give attention to my words; incline your ear to my sayings."*** And I know we've already looked at this idea of listening a time or two over the past two weeks, but Solomon repeats it here at the end: King Solomon wants his sons to LISTEN! He wants them to pay attention to his words. And as we have learned, to "incline" our ears means that we stretch out, that we bend, that we perhaps tilt our head to hear better. He is asking his sons to pay attention. And so, to guard our hearts, we pay attention. We listen to the word of God. But it's not just getting information. We are studying, not to pass a test, but we listen for the purpose of protecting our hearts. We take what we learn, and we allow it to change us. We pray for wisdom, we search the scriptures, and then we adjust our thinking, we change our behavior. We think about our own children. Or for those without children, we think about any other close relationship. How do we know when someone is listening? It depends on the person, all of us listen in different ways, but ultimately, if I ask somebody to do something, I know they're listening when they do whatever it is I've asked them to do. The point here is: It starts with the ears. It starts with listening. To protect the heart, we listen. As James explains, we ***"receive the word implanted, which is able to save our souls."*** And from there, we prove ourselves ***"doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves."*** It starts with the ears. It starts with listening.

II. As we continue in this passage, we skip down to verse 24, and we find a reference to the MOUTH.

***"Put away from you a deceitful mouth and put devious speech far from you."*** The problem with what we say is that we say what we think! So, if we are speaking crooked, and deceitful, and devious words, where are those words coming from? Those words come from the heart! We don't have a mouth problem; we have a heart problem. If I'm constantly putting people down, if I'm always lying, if I'm always exaggerating, if I'm always hurting people with the things I say, if I'm gossiping, if I'm always whining and complaining, if I'm always critical of those around me, that's a heart issue. And so, if I want to know how someone's heart is doing, I just need to listen to what they say. This goes both ways: We can judge others based on what they say, and others will judge us based on what we say.

It seems that Jesus alluded to this Proverb as he spoke with the Pharisees in Matthew 12. Matthew tells us that Jesus knew their thoughts, and then he said to them,

***<sup>33</sup> “Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad; for the tree is known by its fruit. <sup>34</sup> You brood of vipers, how can you, being evil, speak what is good? For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart. <sup>35</sup> The good man brings out of his good treasure what is good; and the evil man brings out of his evil treasure what is evil. <sup>36</sup> But I tell you that every careless word that people speak, they shall give an accounting for it in the day of judgment. <sup>37</sup> For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.”***

Our words are important. Our words reflect what’s going on in our heart. We absorb a lot of what happens in the world around us, and many times, that evil comes to the surface in what we say, in the words that we speak. And this is why Solomon warns his sons. They need to guard their hearts, and the easiest way to see how the heart is doing spiritually is to listen to what comes out of the mouth. And today, we also need to pay attention to the warning. We protect the heart by putting an end to this deceitful and devious speech.

### **III. In verse 25, we come to the next bit of inspired advice as Solomon tells his sons to watch their EYES.**

***“Let your eyes look directly ahead and let your gaze be fixed straight in front of you.”*** In other words, as some of us sang when we were little, “Oh be careful little eyes what you see!” We are to be careful what we look at. We are to be careful what we pay attention to. The research regularly tells us that the information we get through our eyes has more of an impact on us than just about anything else. This is why we use bulletin boards, and pictures, and the projector up here. In fact, if I were to call you this Thursday with a pop quiz, asking what today’s lesson was about, what would you remember? I’m guessing you might remember the beating heart on the wall up here! What we see has an impact on us. Solomon is saying, then, that we need to be careful where we look. We need to be careful that we do not pollute our hearts, that we do not contaminate the source, through the things that we see.

Just recently we referred to King David on the roof of his palace looking down at a woman bathing. He liked what he saw, he made plans, he followed through with those plans, and he even murdered the woman’s husband in the cover-up. That process started with what he saw. King David should have looked away. We think of Jesus’ warning in Matthew 5, ***“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery’; but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”*** It’s easy to justify certain behaviors (it was just a look, just a quick glance, nobody got hurt, she shouldn’t have been wearing what she was wearing, and so on), but sometimes we need to ask ourselves: If that look was not a look of lust, then what was it? We need to look away and move on, asking Him for forgiveness if it’s needed, and remembering what the Lord goes on to say in the very next verse, ***“If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.”*** Solomon was a wise man writing from experience, ***“Let your eyes look directly ahead and let your gaze be fixed straight in front of you.”*** It’s not an eye problem; it’s a heart problem. So, to protect the heart we need to be careful what we look at.

IV. And then, in the last two verses, we come back pretty close to where we left off last week: To protect the heart we must also be careful with our **FEET** (in verses 26-27).

***“Watch the path of your feet and all your ways will be established. Do not turn to the right nor to the left; turn your foot from evil.”*** When Solomon tells his sons to **“watch”** the path of their feet, he uses a word that refers to weighing your options. As we discussed last week, it’s the idea of coming to a fork in the path and deciding which way to go. We need to think it through and choose well. Often, a terrible fall doesn’t start with a huge leap in the wrong direction, but we trip or we slip or we miss a step on the way down, and we fall. The same is true spiritually, so we need to “weigh” the path of our feet, we are to **“watch”** or **“ponder”** (as some translations have it). Earlier this week, some of us watched the GoPro footage from a hiker in Hawaii who lost her footing at the top of a waterfall and fell more than 50 feet down a cliff and into the water. She lived, but barely, and it started with one tiny step in the wrong direction onto a slippery rock. So, spiritually speaking, we protect our heart by weighing our options as we make decisions. We watch where we are going, and we turn away from evil. We don’t just blindly go along with the crowd, but we pay attention.

I mentioned this in our Wednesday class when it happened, but a couple of years ago, I dropped our son off for an exam on the UW campus one night, and I just followed the line on the GPS to get back home. I was driving north, somewhere near the top of Bascom Hill, and I was getting some funny looks from the pedestrians around me. You know the statue of Abraham Lincoln at the top of Bascom Hill? I was driving on what might actually be the sidewalk behind Lincoln and directly in front of Bascom Hall! Somewhere I had missed something! I still don’t know what happened that night. But the same thing can happen spiritually, if we are not careful. It is so easy to get off track. And when that happens, we can’t really blame our feet, can we? It’s not a foot problem; it’s a heart problem. And so we protect our heart by being careful where we go, by watching the paths we choose to take.

#### **Conclusion:**

As we come to the end of this chapter (and especially as we think about guarding the heart), we need to remember that King Solomon completely failed to take his own advice here. Notice, please, a passage from 1 Kings 11,

***<sup>1</sup> Now King Solomon loved many foreign women along with the daughter of Pharaoh: Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Sidonian, and Hittite women, <sup>2</sup> from the nations concerning which the Lord had said to the sons of Israel, “You shall not associate with them, nor shall they associate with you, for they will surely turn your heart away after their gods.” Solomon held fast to these in love. <sup>3</sup> He had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines, and his wives turned his heart away. <sup>4</sup> For when Solomon was old, his wives turned his heart away after other gods; and his heart was not wholly devoted to the Lord his God, as the heart of David his father had been. <sup>9</sup> Now the Lord was angry with Solomon because his heart was turned away from the Lord, the God of Israel, who had appeared to him twice, <sup>10</sup> and had commanded him concerning this thing, that he should not go after other gods; but he did not observe what the Lord had commanded.***

Solomon’s heart turned away from God, because King Solomon allowed his heart to be contaminated by what he brought into it. He turned aside to these other gods, because he invited those gods into his heart. We have King Solomon as an example. Instead of opening our hearts to the world, instead of filling our hearts with trash, we are to take his advice, and we are to fill our hearts with what is good. Let us be careful with what we

hear, with what we see, with what we say, and with where we go. If I want to protect the source of my heart, I cannot allow my heart to get polluted by all of the nastiness, and poison, and pollution this world has to offer. Like in the lab, I cannot contaminate the source. Like the stream I am drinking from, I cannot allow it to be polluted, and like the jug in the darkroom, I cannot allow it to be contaminated; because, whatever the heart concentrates on, the ears will hear, the eyes will see, the mouth will speak, and that is where the feet will go.

So, what do we do if our heart has been corrupted? What do we do if our heart, like King Solomon's heart, has been turned away? We come to God with the attitude David had in our scripture reading this morning (from Psalm 51:10), ***"Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me."*** Today, we make that appeal to God in the act of baptism. In 1 Peter 3:21, **\*\*PPT\*\*** Peter refers to the act of baptism as, ***"an appeal to God for a good conscience—through the resurrection of Jesus Christ."*** By calling out to God in baptism, we are calling on him for salvation. This is the "calling on the name of the Lord" referred to by Peter in Acts 2. In response to that message, 3,000 people turned away from sin and responded with obedience to the gospel message by being baptized for the forgiveness of their sins. If we can help with this, let us know. If you would like to study further, let us know. If we can pray together as you struggle with a heart concern, we hope you will let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

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