

Proverbs 4:20-27  
Guard Your Hearts in '17  
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There are many interesting New Year's Day traditions around the world. Here in the South, we have a tradition of eating black-eyed peas on New Year's Day. In Spain, the tradition is to eat twelve grapes at the stroke of midnight, quickly popping in one grape after another with each chime of the clock. Peruvians do the same thing; only they swallow the twelve grapes whole while sitting under a table. Peruvians also have a tradition of wearing yellow underwear on New Year's Day. We could go on and on because there are many interesting traditions around the world related to New Year's Day. Instead allow me to suggest to you a more sensible New Year's Day tradition. New Year's Day is a good time to stop and to evaluate the state of your heart. I'm not talking about your physical heart. We know how to take care of our physical heart, that most vital physical organ, that muscle which pumps blood, the fluid of life, throughout our physical body. If our physical heart is giving us problems, we will do something about it. We will go see a doctor because we know how important our physical heart is. Yet I am talking about something even more important, our spiritual heart. Our spiritual heart is the very center and essence of our being. The heart in this sense is our most precious treasure. It is the very citadel of our soul, and whoever controls the citadel controls the whole kingdom of our being.

Our text for today tells us our duty in regard to the heart:

23 Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life.

We are to keep our hearts. The verb here translated "keep" is a word which sometimes refers to the duty of watchmen, the sentinels who man the watchtowers of a walled city, ever vigilant for the approach of the enemy. Our responsibility is to keep our heart as the citadel of our soul. We are to guard it from all evil influence and to preserve its integrity. Because of the importance of the heart, we are not merely to keep it. Our text says that we are to keep it with all diligence. This is the most vital of all tasks. If the citadel falls to the enemy, the whole kingdom of our being is lost.

Jesus commented on the importance of the heart in Mark chapter seven. There Jesus said that all of the sins that a person commits first come from within, out of that person's heart. Jesus said, "All these evil things come from within and defile a man." The heart is like a spring or fountain. If the spring is polluted, then all the water which gushes forth from it is polluted. In this sense, we are keepers of the spring. We must protect our heart from any pollution that might defile and contaminate it.

Jesus said something similar in Matthew 12:33-35:

33 "Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or else make the tree bad and its fruit bad; for a tree is known by its fruit.

34 "Brood of vipers! How can you, being evil, speak good things? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.

35 "A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good things, and an evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth evil things.

Jesus, the master of parables, says here that the heart is like a tree. If it is good, it will bring forth good fruit. If it is bad, it will bring forth bad fruit. The heart is like a treasure chest: you can take from it only what is found in it. If it is filled with good things, you can bring forth good things out of it. If it is filled with evil things, you can bring forth evil things out of it. But you can bring forth only what is already found there.

So our duty is to keep the heart, to preserve it in integrity. The question is, Can we do it? Are we adequate to this vital task? The answer is, No, we are not. At least, not in our own strength, not in our own power. Jeremiah says, "The heart is desperately wicked; who can know it?" And I ask you, how can a watchman guard a city he does not know, a city he is not familiar with? The watchman must know well the weaknesses of a city's wall if he is to guard it responsibly, if he is to guard it well.

Our enemy Satan knows our weak points. Our enemy Satan knows well the sins that so easily beset us. Yet we, in our fallen nature, are in a state of denial and self-deception. We do not know ourselves, and we cannot save ourselves. Jeremiah also says that we who do evil can no more change our ways than can a leopard change its spots or an Ethiopian change the color of his skin. We need a savior, a deliverer, a champion if we are to keep our hearts.

Who is adequate for the task of enabling us to keep our hearts? Only one, and that is Jesus Christ. He is qualified to enable us to keep our hearts because He has a perfect heart, a pierced heart and a persevering heart. He has a perfect heart. He is holy, harmless and undefiled. He never thought a sinful thought; He never said a sinful word; He never did a sinful deed. He lived a life of perfect and total obedience. He has a perfect heart and a pierced heart. He died as an atoning sacrifice. He died a death He did not deserve to die. He died as a payment for our sins. He satisfied our legal debt to God's law and thus freed us from all legal claims before God. He has a perfect heart, a pierced heart and a persevering heart. On the third day, He rose from the dead. Because He paid for our sin completely and fully, death could not hold Him. He overcame death and the grave. Through the legal consequences of His atoning work, He also has the power to deliver us from the dominion of sin. He has the power to do what we cannot do for ourselves, to change our very hearts. Jesus is the one with the perfect heart, the pierced heart and the persevering heart. He and He alone is qualified to enable us to keep our own hearts in integrity.

If you want to keep your heart in 2017, then I admonish you first and foremost to keep close to Jesus in 2017. Come near to Him in faith. Rest upon Him alone for your salvation. Look to Him to make you right with God. Look to Him to deliver you from sinful habits and ways. Look to Him to enable you to do what is right and good. Resolve to do those things which God uses to confirm and strengthen a person's faith in Jesus. Worship Jesus regularly with God's people each Lord's Day. Attend to His Word when it is preached faithfully. Receive it with faith

and love. Lay it up in your hearts. Practice it in your lives. Partake frequently of the Lord's Supper and remember His death until He comes. Confess your sins to Him and ask for forgiveness and deliverance. Give Him your thanks for His many blessings and mercies. Offer up to Him in prayer your desires for things agreeable to His revealed will. Do these things in 2017, and pray that God will use them to strengthen and confirm your faith in Jesus.

If you want to keep your heart in 2017, doing these things in order to keep close to Jesus should be your number one priority. With Jesus' help, you will be able to keep, to preserve, to protect your heart in 2017.

A part of preserving one's heart is to take care what goes into one's heart. With Jesus' help, you will be able to follow the council found in verses 20-22 of our text:

- 20 My son, give attention to my words; incline your ear to my sayings.
- 21 Do not let them depart from your eyes; keep them in the midst of your heart;
- 22 For they are life to those who find them, and health to all their flesh.

We must be careful what we feed our souls. We must be careful what we meditate upon. We must be careful which heart appetites we feed and which heart appetites we starve. This world is filled with food for the soul which is at best junk food and at worst poison.

I remember once hearing an interview with a young lady who was a long distance swimmer. In the interview, she told what she did to occupy her mind during those long, boring, repetitious hours when she was swimming long distances. She said that she would think through entire episodes of the Seinfeld TV series. As she swam, she would think through in its entirety episode after episode after episode. I could not help but think when she said this, what a sad choice this was for meditation, for feeding the soul, for reinforcing life lessons. She was reviewing over and over stories which trivialize what is truly serious and which celebrate what is truly irresponsible. How would such meditation influence her when she had serious moral decisions to make in life? How would this influence her in an emergency when she had to make a snap judgment without time for reflection?

I am not saying that we should all join a monastery and never expose ourselves to any cultural phenomenon outside the context of the church and things religious. I am saying that we must be careful what shapes our thoughts and opinions. I am saying that we must be careful what appetites we encourage. We must be careful that when we are exposed to this world, we are able to evaluate it rightfully with the mind of Christ as opposed to allowing the world to influence us and to shape us into its mold. Paul says that we are not to be conformed to this world but to be transformed by the renewing of our mind. David says that the truly blessed man meditates upon the law of God and delights in it.

Look to Jesus in faith, and He will enable you to take proper care as to what goes into your heart. Look to Jesus in faith, depend upon Him on a daily basis and He will enable you to renew your mind.

Look to Jesus in faith, and He also will also enable you to take proper care as to what comes forth out of your heart. Our text mentions three members of our body through which the heart manifests itself: the mouth, the eyes and the feet.

First, the mouth.

24 Put away from you a deceitful mouth, and put perverse lips far from you.

The mouth, the lips and the tongue are our organs of speech. We read in the book of James that they are the most difficult to tame of all creatures, the most difficult to control. In James chapter three, James says that there are many ways in which a Christian can morally stumble in this life, but if a Christian does not stumble into significant sin with his tongue, he is as a rule not going to stumble into significant sin in other ways either. Here are James' exact words: "If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body." That is quite a statement and quite a promise. If a person has a sanctified tongue, then that is evidence that he is living a sanctified life. If a person can control his tongue, then he can morally control all of life. In the power of Jesus, we can indeed control our tongue.

Our passage in Proverbs mentions two areas where we must be careful to avoid verbal sin: deception and perversion. We can use speech to deceive people, to lead them astray through deliberately false statements so that we can take unjust advantage of them. We should tell people the truth and nothing but the truth. We should never deliberately tell anyone something we know as a fact to be false. There are things that we should keep private and share only with those we have come to trust. It is not being deceptive not to tell everyone everything we know, but we should always tell the truth and nothing but the truth.

We should avoid speaking deceptively, and our text says that we should also avoid speaking perversely. There are chemicals that are so corrosive and poisonous that I should not even touch them. There are also subjects that are so morally corrosive and poisonous that I should not even touch upon them in conversation. Why would anyone be tempted to speak perversely? Sometimes people do this to hurt someone, to embarrass someone or to degrade someone. More often people do it in a effort to impress people or simply to try to be funny. If we have the mind of Christ, we will find such language distasteful and we will instinctively avoid it. Our text first mentions the lips and says that we should not speak deceptively or perversely. Our text next mentions the eyes, the organs of sight.

25 Let your eyes look straight ahead, and your eyelids look right before you.



We are to look straight ahead. We are to concentrate on, give our attention to those things which are on the straight and narrow path. These are those things which are within the bounds of faith. These are those things that are within the guidance of God's revealed will, God's moral law. I am to look upon these things as the only things in life which afford true joy, lasting joy, genuine joy. I can also look far ahead down the straight and narrow path and see these same joys in the coming world. There these joys are purified, multiplied and intensified. I can look not only at the joys right before me but I can also look ahead at these greater joys further down the road in anticipation. We can be content with the legitimate joys of this life when we know and believe that they are foretastes of even greater and more abundant joys to come. The pain and misery of this life are temporary, but the legitimate joys of this life are foretastes of the greater banquet to come.

What I must avoid is looking to the right or to the left. To the right and to the left of the straight way are the forbidden joys which are contrary to God's revealed will. As a matter of faith, I must believe that these forbidden joys offer only brief pleasure followed by prolonged pain and regret. Forbidden fruit quickly turns to gravel in the mouth. It may be sweet to the taste, but it will be bitter to the stomach. It is foolish to stare longingly upon that which one cannot rightfully, morally, wisely partake of.

We should not follow the example of Eve who stared longingly upon the forbidden fruit and meditated upon its possible benefits to her. We should not follow the example of Lot's wife who stared longingly upon Sodom after God had commanded her to

leave it and thus fatally delayed her escape from it. We should not follow the example of Achan who stared longingly upon the wedge of gold and the Babylonian garment which God had put under the ban. We should not follow the example of David who stared longingly upon Bathsheba when she was bathing.

Our passage discusses the mouth, the eyes and finally the feet.

26 Ponder the path of your feet, and let all your ways be established.

27 Do not turn to the right or the left; remove your foot from evil.

Our feet represent where we go in life. Those who are ruled by sin tend to go where there are opportunities to sin. Those who regularly fall to temptations tend to go where the temptations indeed are. We are to take care as to what environments we expose ourselves to.

And we are to take care as to what we do when exposed to temptations. We are to follow the example of Joseph who fled with his feet from the immoral advances of Potiphar's wife. We are not to follow the example of the prophet Jonah who used his feet to flee from the presence of the Lord and from His God given duties. We are not to follow the example of Sampson who used his feet to go to Delilah's house until he finally lost his hair and all his strength. The psalmist says that the blessed man walks not in the counsel of the ungodly. In the fourth and fifth chapter of his epistle to the Ephesians, Paul tells us that we should instead walk in sanctified paths of wisdom and

righteousness. We should walk worthy of our calling and not as the world walks. We should walk in love, walk as children of light, and walk circumspectly.

Beloved, our responsibility is great as we approach this new year. We are responsible for the state of our heart, its integrity and its purity. We are responsible for what enters our heart. We are responsible for what comes forth from our heart. We are responsible for what we say, what we look upon, where we go. On the eve of this new year, I point you to Jesus, the great Physician of the heart. He offers forgiveness and cleansing. He can forgive your heart failures, and He can change your heart inclinations. When we come to Him in faith, He forgives our sins, but He also removes our heart of stone and replaces it with a heart of flesh and writes the law of God upon it. He removes our old rebellious spirit and makes pleasing God through obedience to His revealed will our chief aspiration and desire in life. Come to Jesus, and He will do that for you.