

Proverbs 4:20-27

Keeping Our Hearts

Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it [are] the issues of life – v. 23

Those of you who are familiar with certain Christian seasons or holidays will know that we are now in that time period that Catholics and Lutherans and probably some others refer to as Lent. Lent begins with a day known as Ash Wednesday which this year fell back on March 9.

On Ash Wednesday devoted Catholics will take the time to visit their church and the priest in their church will apply an ash smear to the foreheads of those who come to receive it. The tradition has it that it was on Ash Wednesday that Christ began his final journey to Jerusalem where he would be crucified 40 days later. I remember when I worked in Printing you could always identify the devout Catholics on Ash Wednesday by the marks on their foreheads.

I remember during those days how annoying (to say the least) that I found Ash Wednesday because I despise the notion that a person's religion can be worn on his forehead, or can be practiced by mere external motions for a little season. In fact – Christianity, real Christianity is a religion of the heart. It effects the heart. The gospel of Jesus Christ runs deep in a man's soul and it effects not merely a few external matters during certain times of the year. It changes everything.

The gospel becomes the power and the principle that governs all that we do, and all that we don't do. It effects how you view God. It effects how you view and treat others. It effects how you interpret the circumstances of life. It effects how you view sin and how you view your home. It effects you in your job. It effects you in school. It effects you in your recreation. No part of life remains unaffected by the power of the gospel.

This is why Paul writes to the Corinthians and tells them – *If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.* This is why salvation is equated to a new birth – a birth from above.

By virtue of this new birth the Christian loves holiness and he loves Christ. He desires more of Christ - but resistance comes from an old nature that still resides in him and wars against his soul. He use to love sin and hate Christ but now he loves Christ and hates sin. What is the difference in the make up of a Christian from a non-Christian? The difference is this – The Christian has gained a new heart.

His heart has been opened by supernatural power. The vail has been taken away from his heart so that he can see in Christ the very dying form of One who gave Himself for him. And he is enabled by Divine power to respond to the gospel and close in with Christ. What is prophesied in Ezekiel is at least in part his experience when Ezekiel says Eze 36:26 *A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh.*

The old nature has not yet been removed, but a new nature has been implanted. And it is *from this heart* that we believe unto salvation. It is *from this heart* that we love the Lord our God. It is *from this new heart of flesh* that we gain the motivation that leads to our striving to obey the ways of the Lord. Where we find ourselves getting into trouble as Christians is when we forget that Christianity is a religion of the heart and we focus instead on external compliance to certain standards which is tantamount to saying that we become just like those Ash Wednesday Christians. We think that our compliance to certain dress standards and certain conduct standards is the sum and substance of our religion.

When you stop and think about it, I think you would agree with me that that kind of religion is nothing short of Phariseeism. There's a certain appeal, you know, to Phariseeism. It makes it easier for a dominating minister to control his congregation. And it makes it easier for some parents to control their children. If we acknowledge that Christianity is a heart religion then Christianity suddenly is beyond my control. It is much easier to try to force external compliance on a people. It is impossible for me to control someone else's heart. And when a minister or a parent recognizes that Christianity is a matter of the heart it tends to drive a minister or a parent to their knees. *Lord, my children need a change of heart and only God can change a heart. I can force compliance to rules but I can't change a heart. I need you, Lord, to do what I cannot do.*

When such a prayer is answered for the sinner who gains a new heart in salvation then along with this heart comes a solemn responsibility committed to us by God. And this leads to the words of our text –

Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life.

Keep thy heart. Be mindful of its condition. Attend to it. Guard it. Strive to know it. Be honest before God regarding it. I say the responsibility is solemn because the potential is so great for much good or much harm. Listen to the words of Prov. 2:10-13. This proverb gives you something of an idea of what's at stake:

When wisdom entereth into thine heart, and knowledge is pleasant unto thy soul; 11 Discretion shall preserve thee, understanding shall keep thee: 12 To deliver thee from the way of the evil man, from the man that speaketh froward things; 13 Who leave the paths of uprightness, to walk in the ways of darkness...

I would like for us to analyze this precept today – with the simple aim of heeding it. *Keep thy heart with all diligence.* Consider with me 1st of all –

I. The Realm to which the Precept Applies – *Keep thy heart.*

It has been customary throughout church history to conceive of man as consisting of two and only two distinct parts – i.e. body and soul. Charles Hodge calls this view of man the common view of the church.

Alongside of this view however another view developed – a view which did not become prominent until the 19th century. This is the view of man that sees him as consisting of three distinct parts – body, soul, and spirit. The one view is called *dichotomy*. The other is called *trichotomy*.

There are two passages of Scripture that give strong support to the *trichotomy* view – in 1 Thess. 5:23 we have Paul’s prayer for the Thessalonians that *the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

And in Heb. 4:12 we read – *For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.*

The Reformers and others were of course aware of these verses but still held to the *dichotomy* view of man. They did so because they knew how difficult if not impossible it is to draw the distinction between the soul and the spirit.

The soul, you see, is referred to as that invisible part of man which stands in contrast to the body. And so we read in Mt. 10:28 that we are to *fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.*

The spirit in man can refer to the same thing. So in Lk. 8:54 – *And He (Jesus) put them all out, and took her by the hand, and called saying, Maid arise. And her spirit came again, and she arose straightway.*

The soul is sometimes referred to as that element within us that pertains to our senses – that by which we perceive, reflect, feel and desire. And so we read in Lk. 1:46 *And Mary said My soul doth magnify the Lord.* Her soul – all that was within her. Her inward perception, her feelings, her desires were all filled to overflowing because of the tremendous privilege and favor that was bestowed upon her. And in the very next verse she says *And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Savior.* The soul and the spirit once again being used interchangeably.

And so the distinction between soul and spirit is very tough to establish – and yet it seems that there is in some deep and mysterious way that only God knows that only God can divide – there is such a distinction.

The distinction does not seem to be one of function – but perhaps one of depth. The spirit referring to the deepest part of man’s soul – the very core of his being. Viewed this way I think you can draw an analogy with the soul and the mind – while the spirit corresponds to the heart. Not so much a difference in function – but a difference in depth.

I think I should point out under this heading – that the soul of man, the spirit or the heart of man along with the body of man is included in what Christ has redeemed by His

blood. And in accomplishing this redemption – Christ’s sufferings went to the very depth of His soul.

It was not just the physical pain as such that constituted the essence of His suffering, but that pain accompanied with anguish of soul and with a mediatorial consciousness of the sin of humanity with which He was burdened. And so we read how He agonized in the garden, where His soul was exceeding sorrowful, even unto death. And we read the prophetic statement in Ps 22:14 *I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint: my heart is like wax; it is melted in the midst of my bowels.*

Now when you consider that the heart of man is the seat of his feelings and desires; It is the seat of his will and purpose; It is the seat of his appetites, the seat of his affections, the seat of the new life – when you come to appreciate in some measure the scope of what’s at stake with regard to man’s heart – then you’ll see the importance of the precept prescribed in our text – *Keep thy heart with all diligence.*

The heart is a great chasm that runs deeper than what we can penetrate. The potential for great joy and peace and favor and blessing of heart is possible – but the potential for great harm and destruction and defilement and deception is also possible – *the heart is deceitful and desperately wicked* – Jeremiah tells us.

Just knowing the potential that is possible in either direction should move the Christian to give careful heed to this precept. And could I drive the point home also that the worst advice that runs rampant in our culture today is to *just follow your heart*. That’s the gospel according to Hollywood – and they certainly know how to make it appear glamorous. It’s the gospel of humanism – that tells you it is acceptable to act irresponsibly by impulse.

Just follow your heart – is the reason that many marriages are ruined. *Just follow your heart* – is the reason why the lives of many young people are defiled by sin. We are given over to emotional impulse – and many young people are led astray by a deceptive guide when they follow the world’s philosophy that tells them *if it feels good, it must be right. If I have strong feelings about someone or something then I must be going the right direction.*

Solomon tells us later in the book of Proverbs that - *He that trusteth in his own heart is a fool: but whoso walketh wisely, he shall be delivered.* (Prov. 28:26). We want to do all that we do from the heart. We want to worship from the heart. We want to love Christ from the heart. We want to obey Him and serve Him from the heart – but in order to do so the heart must be tended to – it must be searched, it must be purged, it must be enlightened, it must gain wisdom and understanding – in other words *it must be kept.*

And this leads to our next consideration – We see the realm to which the precept applies, think with me now on –

II. The Manner in which the Precept is Practiced – *Keep thy heart with all diligence*

Keep or guard your heart the precept tells us. The noun form of the word *keep* depicts a watchman. Watch over your heart. And in order to keep watch over our hearts we have to be aware of the dangers within and the dangers without.

There are grave dangers from within our hearts -

Mt 15:19 For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies:

These things must be purged constantly – the way weeds are cleaned out of a garden. And the way they are purged is through the blood of Christ. And then of course we must make every effort to shield our hearts from the things that would provoke the lusts within it.

Now the book of Proverbs in particular is very instructive when it comes to the matter of fortifying the heart – strengthening our stand against the dangers within and the dangers without. There are some things mentioned in Proverbs for instance that must be engraved upon the heart – written deeply, entrenched firmly in the heart. So we read in Prov. 3:3 *Let not mercy and truth forsake thee: bind them about thy neck; write them upon the table of thine heart.*

And in Prov. 6:20-23 *My son, keep thy father's commandment, and forsake not the law of thy mother: 21 Bind them continually upon thine heart, and tie them about thy neck. 22 When thou goest, it shall lead thee; when thou sleepest, it shall keep thee; and when thou awakest, it shall talk with thee. 23 For the commandment is a lamp; and the law is light; and reproofs of instruction are the way of life.*

I think ultimately the two texts are pointing us to the same truth. Simply stated these texts teach us that our hearts must be fortified with the gospel of Christ. At the end of the day isn't that a father's commandment and the law of thy mother in Christian homes?

Oh the Lord knows that as parents there are many things we could have done and should have done better. Nobody knows better than our children what kind of faults and inconsistencies we bear – but in spite of ourselves we are still able to discharge our duty if we'll teach our children the gospel and point them to Christ.

And you young people and children in this congregation should know that your father's commandment and the law of your mother amounts to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Keep your father's commandment and forsake not the law of your mother. They have bearing on the eternal destiny of your soul as well as your well-being in this life. Marvel not at what you may think to be their shortcomings or inconsistencies. If they were perfect they wouldn't need the gospel of free grace. They know Christ. They know

salvation. They know how the gospel applies to the perplexities of life. They know how the gospel enables us to strive against our short comings and inconsistencies.

Now we are told in that text in Prov. 3:3 to *let not mercy and truth forsake thee: bind them about thy neck; write them upon the table of thine heart.* Can mercy and truth ever really forsake us? And the answer is of course – no. Our salvation is as secure as Christ’s blood and Christ’s throne in heaven. But the failure to commune with Christ, the failure to examine our hearts in the light of the gospel; our failure to avail ourselves of the grace that can be obtained from the throne of grace can leave us in the place where we are deprived or robbed of the peace and joy and the vitality that can be and should be our portion.

We considered the doctrine of forgiveness last week. Maintaining forgiveness is a part of keeping our hearts. I love the petition in the Lord’s prayer that teaches us to pray *forgive us our debts.* I am so thankful for that petition. The Lord knew we would need it often. He said *when you pray* make this your petition. He didn’t say pray for these other matters and once in a while on that rare occasion when you might find it necessary pray *forgive us our debts.* No – *when you pray* He said. And what that petition tells you is that when you seek forgiveness you’ll gain it every time. Has Christ taught us to pray these things if He’s unwilling to bestow them?

Perhaps you’ve gone astray. Perhaps you’ve been cold and careless this past week and those inner lusts of the heart have defiled you again and again. Perhaps you’ve forsaken prayer and forsaken time in the Word. Maybe this has been the case for you for more than a week. Maybe it’s been the case for a month or longer – maybe you’ve fallen into more serious sin. Look at that prayer again in Mt. 6 – Has your neglect or your sins erased the verse that invites you to address God as *our Father which art in heaven?*

I’ve come to the Lord in prayer a number of times not feeling much like His child, feeling much more like the prodigal son – a wayward wanderer and squanderer – but it’s still there – *our Father which art in heaven.* And it’s still there – *forgive us our debts.* This is how we keep mercy and truth from forsaking us, then. We utilize this petition when we pray. In so doing we write the truth of the gospel upon our hearts.

Keep thy heart with all diligence our text tells us. I don’t have time to dwell on the manner in which this precept is to be observed – it’s to be done diligently – i.e. with fervor and regularity. One of Jonathan Edwards resolutions reads like this: *Resolved, To inquire every night, as I am going to bed, wherein I have been negligent – what sin I have committed – and wherein I have denied myself; also at the end of every week, month, and year.* Here’s a man who took this matter of keeping his heart with diligence very seriously. – Asking God like the Psalmist to search our hearts, apply grace to our hearts, and at last to shed abroad in our hearts that love of Christ which passes knowledge. I want to think finally for a moment on:

III. The Reason why The Precept is Important – *Keep thy heart with all diligence for out of it are the issues of life.*

This is where the difference between heart issues and external compliance issues becomes crucial. According to the text heart issues are life issues. Life issues spring from the heart. If that's true then it means we not only have to tend to our own hearts to keep them but we have to aim for the hearts of our children when we train them.

When we treat our religion as nothing more than external compliance then we've deceived ourselves into thinking that external matters are the issues of life. And that's when we begin to live like Pharisees and to train our children to become good little Pharisees. If we do this effectively then we'll have impressive looking children who are nothing but white-washed sepulchres whose hearts are far from God.

But if we recognize that the heart is where the issues of life spring then we'll be devoted to the heart condition of our children. It will be our desire that they fall in love with Christ and that they gain a true and real perception of his love for them. And the way this is obtained must be through their own and our own coming into heart to heart communion with Christ.

I mean to tell you that this poses a much tougher challenge than what we at times realize. For what this means is that our children must be able to see in us that we walk with Christ and that we live our lives by basking in the reality of his love. They must see in us that we are confident of his love even when things aren't going the way we think they should. And we utilize His grace when we need it which is often. We are able to submit to him and say like Job – *though he slay me, yet will I trust him.*

This requires that we seek Christ, that we keep close devotion and communion with Christ and that we maintain a faith in Christ that grows stronger with the passing of time. It's much easier to give up on this kind of spiritual outlook and discipline and simply raise our children to be good little compliant Pharisees.

It's a frightful thing to think of the hardness that can come over the believer's heart through spiritual neglect. If left untended he fulfills Isaiah's prophecy - Isa 29:13 *Wherefore the Lord said, Forasmuch as this people draw near [me] with their mouth, and with their lips do honour me, but have removed their heart far from me.*

What a tragedy for the people of God. They go through the motions of worship and religion but with hearts that are far from God. For some inexplicable reason they've come to doubt the truth of Christ's heart and love toward them.

A heart that is kept, on the other hand, finds that there is a strength that far exceeds our own strength gained by keeping close to Christ. I love a text in the psalms that illustrates this strength - Ps 18:29 *For by thee I have run through a troop; and by my God have I leaped over a wall.* There's a picture of a heart strengthened and set free by the love of Christ.

Now keeping our hearts is an important and yet really a very simple procedure. It's not a demanding precept or a burdensome law at all. In Pr 23:26 you can hear Christ calling when He says - *My son, give me thine heart*. A lifting up of our souls to God – an opening of our hearts to Christ – a yielding of ourselves to Him. Placing our heads on the breast of Christ to hear the throb of His heart for us.

That's how keeping our hearts is practiced – I give my heart to Christ, I don't attempt to change it myself. I can't cleanse it. I can't strengthen it. I can't control it. But I can lift it to Him. I can open it to Him. And if you will give him your heart anew this day in whatever condition it's in – you can expect that based on His promise – He'll cleanse it. He'll strengthen it. He'll guide it. He'll protect it. He'll revive it. He'll search it and minister to it's deepest needs.

And so I wonder this morning – can you hear the Spirit of God speaking for Christ through His word when He says to you – *My son (or my daughter, or my child) – give me thine heart?* Christ deserves your heart, you know. His soul was poured out for you. He's demonstrated to you a heart of love that took Him to Calvary's cross.

I trust the words of the hymn will speak to your experience that say: *That Man of Calvary – Has won my heart from me – And died to set me free – Blest man of Calvary.* Has He won your heart? Does He have your heart? Will you give Him your heart? Hear again His word and know that it comes from His heart when He says: *My son, give me thine heart.*