

Keeping the Heart

SERMON

By

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TEXT: Proverbs 4:20-27 (23)

PROP: The keeping of and proper management of the heart is the Christian's most important duty.

Proverbs 4:20-27 (ESV)

- 20 My son, be attentive to my words;
incline your ear to my sayings.
- 21 Let them not escape from your sight;
keep them within your heart.
- 22 For they are life to those who find them,
and healing to all their flesh.
- 23 Keep your heart with all vigilance,
for from it flow the springs of life.
- 24 Put away from you crooked speech,
and put devious talk far from you.
- 25 Let your eyes look directly forward,
and your gaze be straight before you.
- 26 Ponder the path of your feet;
then all your ways will be sure.
- 27 Do not swerve to the right or to the left;
turn your foot away from evil.

"Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life."

Most of us have seen something that was disgusting or fearsome or even terrible; an automobile accident, a home on fire or the violence of war, killing thousands with poison gas. The Apostle Paul tells us of something that in my opinion is far worse than catastrophes or human misery. He writes,

Philippians 3:18-19 (ESV)

18 For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. 19 Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.

Think of the terror of being an enemy of Christ.

Many in Judah probably wondered at the words of the prophet Jeremiah,

Jeremiah 33:10-11 (ESV)

10 "Thus says the Lord: In this place of which you say, 'It is a waste without man or beast,' in the cities of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem that are desolate, without man or inhabitant or beast, there shall be heard again 11 the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the voices of those who sing, as they bring thank offerings to the house of the Lord:

" 'Give thanks to the Lord of hosts,
for the Lord is good,
for his steadfast love endures forever!'

For I will restore the fortunes of the land as at first, says the Lord.

Jeremiah spoke of a time when God lay waste to Judah for her sins and many who truly loved the Lord would go through the same devastation. The times in which we live are very unsettling just as they were for Judah. All of this leads us to think on the importance of "keeping the heart."

The Lord, through Solomon commands us,

Proverbs 4:23 (ESV)

23 Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life.

To keep ones heart with all vigilance translates the idea of the Hebrew text very well. The idea is not so much diligence as it is guarding the heart or watching over it, so literally we read "with all guarding, keep your heart." I propose to consider briefly the substance of "keeping the heart" and the manner of performing it, "with all vigilance." And just what is this heart? Paul speaks of those whose "foolish heart was darkened." That is to say, their understanding was darkened. The Psalmist speaks of storing up the word of God in our hearts. Thus the heart is a place for storing up the laws of God and delighting in them. Then John speaks of the heart as if it were our conscience; "If our heart condemn us." The commentators Keil and Delitzsch speak of the heart being an instrument of thinking, willing and the seat of knowledge of self and God.

The heart is surrounded by enemies without and treacherous inhabitants within and we must keep it. That is to say we must watch over it, we must guard it. How must we do this? With all guarding or very certainly, very surely. We are to exercise great

care to watch over our hearts and with the, most urgent of motives. Our hearts, our souls are nothing to trifle with. Yet we cannot exercise this kind of watch-care in our own strength. We need God's help and his power. As Jesus said, "without me you can do nothing."

1. It is the inward cleansing of the heart that makes the Christian and not any sort of outward cleansing.

On one occasion the Pharisees had noticed the disciples of Jesus were eating their food with unwashed hands and were horrified. They had been to the marketplace and had touched things that belonged to gentiles and now were tainted with gentile filth. And that was not all. Their pots and pans no doubt had pieces of gentile pollution on them and they too went unwashed. That is, they were not ceremonially washed. "Why do you let your disciples do that?", they asked of Christ. In His answer to them, Jesus pointed out they were very hypocritical in their usage of tradition. While they were careful to rid themselves of gentile dirt they let their aged parents starve. If they didn't want to support their parents the common practice was to say that all their money was Corban. That is, that the money they could have used to keep their parents from starvation was instead dedicated to the temple and couldn't be used for other purposes. Thus they disobeyed the fifth commandment on the one hand, but washed their hands (which has no biblical basis) on the other.

Jesus went on to note that it isn't dirt on the outside that defiles a person, rather sin that derives from the heart.

Mark 7:20-23 (ESV)

20 And he said, "What comes out of a person is what defiles him. 21 For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, 22 coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. 23 All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

It is from the heart that we love God on the one hand and sin on the other. Our zeal for Christ and His kingdom arises from our heart. Our passion for God, our longing for His fellowship, is the issue of our heart as is our propensity for sin, our lust, our love of the world. Thus is the condition of our heart very important indeed. Eternal verities, indeed, hang on the state of our heart.

Hezekiah was known as a "good" king. We are told that he did right in the sight of the LORD, according to all that his father David had done. Yet this godly man did not keep his heart as he should have done. Toward the end of his life we are told that

2 Chronicles 32:25 (ESV)

25 -- Hezekiah did not make return according to the benefit done to him, for his heart was proud. Therefore wrath came upon him and Judah and Jerusalem.

Even the godly David, the "man after God's own heart," brought deep shame upon himself, yes, but also upon all Israel and more seriously upon God Himself. "May my heart be blameless in Thy statues," he wrote in Psalm 119, "that I might not be ashamed." If such godly men can so easily fall into sin how much more must we guard our hearts. Consider the unhappiness, the anguish, yes, the woe that came to both David and Hezekiah because they did not keep their hearts as they ought to have kept them.

2. Keeping the heart presupposes sanctification.

The heart will not be properly guarded if conversion has not taken place. Making contrast between Christians and non-Christians, Paul speaks of the latter as being futile of mind, darkened in their understanding, callous, given to sensuality, practicing every kind of impurity with greediness. Christians, on the other hand, have put on a new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth. He says that those who are in the flesh (the unconverted) cannot please God. No matter what they say or do they cannot please God. **They not only will not subject themselves to the Law of God but are not even able to do so** (Romans 8:7).

Now the contrast with those who have been converted is stark. People who have been changed by God cry out Abba! Father! They have the Spirit of God. They are led by the Spirit. They are in the process of putting to death the deeds of the body. No trivial thing this, that the Spirit of God should dwell in them. Children! Heirs! Glory to be revealed in them! Instead of futility hope! Adoption as sons! The redemption of the body! How can we not be moved to keep our hearts and to be moved with passion to do so. We who were dead in our transgressions have been made alive together with Christ! What a contrast! Dead vs. Alive! You see the simple truth is this; dead people have no desire to keep the heart, therefore the ability to keep the heart presupposes the work of the Spirit of God to cleanse and sanctify us.

3. To keep the heart requires constant care.

Zophar, one of Job's erstwhile friends, said, (speaking to Job)

Job 11:13-14 (ESV)

13 "If you prepare your heart,

- you will stretch out your hands toward him.
- 14 If iniquity is in your hand, put it far away,
and let not injustice dwell in your tents.

Zophar was wrong in his application of this truth to Job but he was not wrong in what he said. To properly prepare the heart requires great vigilance. It requires constant care.

Frequent observation is required if we would guard our hearts. The psalmist states,

Psalm 77:6 (ESV)

- 6 I said, "Let me remember my song in the night;
let me meditate in my heart."
Then my spirit made a diligent search:

The heart can never be kept unless it is frequently examined.

We read of Hezekiah that God's wrath did not come upon Judah in the days of Hezekiah. Why? Because Hezekiah humbled the pride of his heart, both he and the inhabitants of Jerusalem. We therefore should learn another principle to help us when we have heart trouble. Deep humiliation before the LORD is one of the cures.

Then there is the matter of constant prayer. We should pray with David; "Who can discern his errors? Acquit me of hidden faults." Bradford, the Puritan, would never stop praying until his heart was broken. He would never stop praying for mercy until he had gotten some taste of it.

We should impose strong oaths and promises to walk more perfectly with God and we should avoid occasions in which the heart may be induced to sin. As Job said, "I have made a covenant with my eyes, to keep my eyes from sin."

There should be a constant jealousy over our hearts. Says Proverbs 28:14, "How blessed is the man who fears always. But he who hardens his heart will fall into calamity."

Knowing that we cannot hide from God, we should always be setting Him before us. He told Abraham to "walk before Me and be perfect." Job asks, "does He not see my ways, and remember all my steps." He is the God who is there and we must live in His presence.

IV. Keeping the heart is hard work.

That we must keep our heart with all vigilance indicates to us that the matter cannot be treated carelessly or superficially. It isn't very difficult to come up with some kind of prayer that we always recite when we come to God for forgiveness. We can rattle off the phrase from the Lord's Prayer "and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors" but to be really ashamed of our sin and humbled before God is hard. It is the particular genius of the devil to render our prayer lives ineffective. We must not give up the keeping of our hearts. The LORD commands, "Give me your heart my son and let your eyes delight in my ways." Thus is God pleased to call the heart a gift it is very important.

We conclude then that to attain facility and dexterity of language in prayer is relatively easy, but to get the heart broken while confessing sin, to be really humbled through the apprehension of God's holiness, is truly difficult. However, that is the very essence of keeping the heart and strengthening the life that springs from it.

Let us observe again the strong command given by God to keep the heart. *"Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life."* Our manner of keeping the heart must be with all vigilance because the outcome of all the issues of life depend the condition of our heart. So we have seen **what** it means to us to keep the heart and now we shall consider the **why** of keeping the heart. **Why should Christians keep the heart?**

We should give all vigilance to keeping the heart in the first place because the glory and honor of God are at stake. Heart evils are very desperate wickedness and are very provoking to God,

Genesis 6:5-7 (ESV)

5 The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. 6 And the Lord was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. 7 So the Lord said, "I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens, for I am sorry that I have made them."

Jerusalem needed to wash her heart from evil that she might be saved. (Jeremiah 4:14) According to Isaiah 66, heart evils are so provoking that anything done even if it is good in itself is an abomination. Murder and idolatry are not more provoking, they are not more vile than sacrifices made with unrepentant hearts, Simon Magus (Acts 8:21) would sell the healing mercies of God for his own profit because his heart was not right. Therefore we need to keep our hearts because the glory and honor of God are at stake.

The story is told of a soldier in the army of Alexander the great, who was brought before the great world conqueror for court martial. When the emperor had listened to the charges and the evidence, he turned to the soldier facing condemnation, and said,

"What is your name?"

"Alexander;" was the reply.

Again the emperor questioned, "What is your name?"

And the second time the soldier answered, "Alexander;"

With a cry of rage, the emperor roared, "I say, what is your name?"

And when the soldier answered for the third time, "Alexander;" the great general angrily replied, "You say your name is Alexander? You are found guilty of your crime as charged, and now you must pay the penalty. Either you change your conduct or change your name, for no man can bear the name of Alexander, my name, and do the things that you have done. "

Then there is the matter of the sincerity of our profession of faith. No matter how earnest we may appear to be externally, carelessness with the heart brings with it great hypocrisy. Jehu did a great service to the lord by killing Jezebel and eradicating Baal out of the land but we read in 11 kings 10:31, "But Jehu was not careful to walk in the law of Yahweh, the god of israel, with all his heart; he did not depart from the sins of jeroboam, which he made Israel sin." similarly with Simon Magus, "You have no part or portion in this matter, for your heart is not right before god." This is crass hypocrisy.

Someone may object, "Do what I might I cannot keep my heart right with god," but the one who works hard at it, though he is not perfect, will find sufficient means to overcome it.

Psalm 119:11 (ESV)

11 I have **stored up** your word in my heart,
that I might not sin against you.

Here is a means of grace to overcome hypocrisy, laying up the Bible in our hearts. Not simply memorizing it but it is a matter of strongly desiring it.

Another means of grace to overcome hypocrisy is prayer.

Psalm 119:36-37 (ESV)

36 Incline my heart to your testimonies,
and not to selfish gain!
37 Turn my eyes from looking at worthless things;

and give me life in your ways.

Pray god to incline your heart to his testimonies.

Why should we keep the heart with all vigilance? Because the beauty of holiness finds its source in the orderliness of our hearts. As the heart is, so shall the life be.

1 Peter 2:11-12 (ESV)

11 Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. 12 Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.

The righteous, therefore, are more excellent than their ungodly neighbors because they shine as lights in the world,

Isaiah 55:7 (ESV)

7 let the wicked forsake his way,
and the unrighteous man his thoughts;
let him return to the Lord, that he may have compassion on him,
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

Jesus said, if the heart be wicked then, out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders." (Matthew 15:19) First are the thoughts and then are the actions. On the other hand, David notes that if the heart is holy,

Psalms 45:1 (ESV)

1 My heart overflows with a pleasing theme;
I address my verses to the king;
my tongue is like the pen of a ready scribe.

Thus do these richly spiritual verses flow from an orderly heart,

Ps 37:30-31 (ESV)

30 The mouth of the righteous utters wisdom,
and his tongue speaks justice.
31 The law of his God is in his heart;
his steps do not slip.

Thus the mouth and the tongue follow a godly heart. Orderly hearts contrast greatly with the wicked. Your neighbors are surprised that you do not run with them into the same excess of dissipation, and they malign you; but they shall give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead." (1 Peter 4:4)

Now the **comfort of the soul** also depends on the vigilant keeping of the heart. The Arminian believes that the only assurance of comfort our souls receive is from the Spirit himself who "Bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God." (Romans 8:16) But we must realize that sanctification is also the work of the Holy Spirit. The Puritan, Roberts, told the story of a Christian who desired infallible assurance to comfort his soul. He wanted a voice from heaven. As he would walk in the woods he wanted to hear the trees and stones speak assurance to him as he communed with God in nature, but in time it was only the word of God, the Scriptures, that convinced him that God was for him and not against him.

A neglected heart will be confused and dark with little assurance and we know that God does not give assurance to the lazy and slothful. What hope there is in such cases is that the seed was planted in good ground, but when there is no fruit there is little cause for hope, so brethren, let us avoid fruitlessness. Let us instead work for that fruit which finds its source from an orderly heart.

Why should we be vigilant to keep the heart? Because the improvement of God's graces depends on keeping the heart. We should keep our hearts --

Ephesians 3:17-19 (ESV)

17 so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, 18 may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, 19 and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

We should keep our hearts so that what we speak arises from what is in our hearts even as Paul who wrote

Ephesians 3:17-19 (ESV)

17 so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, 18 may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, 19 and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

David wrote

Psalm 63:5-6 (ESV)

- 5 My soul will be satisfied as with fat and rich food,
and my mouth will praise you with joyful lips,
6 when I remember you upon my bed,
and meditate on you in the watches of the night;

The un-kept heart knows nothing of fat and rich food nor does it know anything of the preciousness of god's thoughts. Heart neglect is like the sower's bag with a leak at the bottom. The birds follow the sower and eat up all the seed. Thus can the neglect of the heart devour us, therefore brethren we must keep the heart with all vigilance that our life with God be found precious and satisfying.

Finally let us note that the **stability of our souls** depends on the quality of our keeping the heart. The Puritans notice certain stages in the development of temptation in our lives. The first is the irritation or provoking of lust. Then comes motion toward evil. Next is the choice of evil and lastly the desire or apprehension of it. The un-kept heart is easy prey for that sort of progression. As the Syrians were led blind into Samaria before they knew they were there, in like manner, the un-kept heart is prey to lust.

So then we have before us a great, if not the greatest motive to watch over our heart with all vigilance. Our assurance of salvation depends on the quality of keeping the heart. We must keep the heart with all vigilance in order to make our calling and election sure. *"Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life."*