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## **“Guard Your Heart!” Proverbs 4:20-27**

### Introduction

Fear God! Hear Wisdom! Guard Your Heart! Week #3 in our study of living wisely in a broken world. Whenever most of take a trip of any distance, we consult a map. In the olden days (I am dating myself), it was a huge Rand-McNally atlas or you would go down to AAA for a triptik (which I still do sometimes). A few years ago, GPS systems were all the rage for taking a road trip and are still popular. And now you don't even need that as many cell-phones have built-in GPS software available. But we often still need directions—however we get them—without them we would be lost.

Most people are looking for path or the map that leads to abundant life—which Jesus Christ spoke about in John 10:10, “I have come that you might have life and have it more abundantly.” But what is the path that leads to such a life? Many think the path of financial success leads to a full life, others think devoting themselves to their work, or making a name for themselves, or padding their influence in this world will lead to fullness. Others seek the path of maximizing leisure and pleasure for living the good life, while others think the best route is to just sort of float down the river of life and see what happens.

All such paths that man may take toward the abundant life can be reduced to either self-reliance or God-reliance. The first will promises fullness but delivers emptiness; the second seems somewhat more difficult (because of our pride) but rewards us with fullness of joy and pleasures forevermore.

Proverbs is the revelation of God to us about the path of God-reliance that leads to the abundant life. It offers wisdom—the ability to live life skillfully in God's world. Wisdom is not simply the accumulation of facts and experiences, rather it is the application of truth to life. Wisdom is the greatest possession that anyone can have, and young people should seek wisdom, which is found in Jesus Christ alone, as their primary goal in life. Treasure it, store it up, raise your voice for it, seek it like silver!

Wisdom begins by fearing God—which means we are aware of God's presence with us so that we have a sense of sweet reverence or deep respect for His authority but also an awareness of his hatred toward sin. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight." (Proverbs 9:10).

When we fear God, we will want to keep his commandments for this is whole duty of man. Man's duty involves both his duty toward God and his duty toward fellow man. Proverbs deals primarily with the latter as it addresses our attitudes, actions, what we

value, how we use our time, how we treat our friends and neighbors, how families are to work, how we speak, control our appetites, manage our finances, work at our jobs, treat marriage and sex.

To live abundantly, to live fully, then Proverbs tells us to be people of this book. "Bind them on your heart always; tie them around your neck. When you walk, they will lead you; when you lie down, they will watch over you; and when you awake, they will talk with you. For the commandment is a lamp and the teaching a light, and the reproofs of discipline are the way of life," (Proverbs 6:21-23).

Now, as we continue exploring particular themes in Proverbs, we want to listen to another call for wisdom in this book. There are ten such calls to sons who are just about ready to enter mature adulthood—ten calls from fathers to their almost adult sons. Collectively they display the urgency and influence of parental love—what a great responsibility rests with parents to call their children to wisdom—something no professional teacher, pastor, or government can do as effectively. In chapter 4, there are three such calls. The first one in vv. 1-9 "illustrates how wisdom is an inheritance that may be passed from generation to generation. It can preserve a whole family line through the passing of years. It is, however, an inheritance that each generation must choose to receive. If the chain is broken and the way of wisdom is rejected, the results will be disastrous for the family." (New American Bible Commentary).

The rest of the chapter develops the metaphor of two paths. The second call of wisdom in verses 10-19 urges young men (and women) to stay off the wrong path and the third and final call pleads with them to not swerve off the right path (vv. 20-27). This last call to wisdom starts with a general call and then addresses several parts of your life that must be guarded so that you don't swerve off the right path.

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.

### **Another call to wisdom**

Please notice that this command to "keep your your heart with all vigilance" is preceded by a call again to wisdom! We have seen the elements of "being attentive" and "inclining our ear" to wise words already in Proverbs 2. Much of the book of Proverbs is

repetitious—but it is so by design. Solomon repeats themes again and again for that is how we learn best. We should never grow tired of hearing familiar truth and exhortation. We need that in our lives (Romans 15:15; 2 Timothy 1:6; 2 Peter 1:12,15).

Once again, there is this idea of bending—not just your ear but your whole orientation of heart toward wisdom. And then as we bend toward wisdom with our ears, eyes, and feet, then we are to keep the wisdom God gives us. We are to guard wisdom in our hearts (v. 21) and then we are to make sure wisdom guards our hearts (v. 23).

The phrase “keep them within your heart” show that just like the 10 commandments were to be housed in the middle of the ark of the covenant which was in the middle of the tabernacle and temple so the father’s wise teaching is to be in the center of the son’s heart.

Verse 22 shows that walking in wisdom benefits every area of your life: physical, spiritual, and emotional. Walking in wisdom is like good medicine and godliness has benefit for this life and for the life to come.

Finally, this repeated call to wisdom remind us that as one man has written, “The centrifugal force of life has a tendency to move wisdom to the outer fringes of our conscious attention.” Thus transmitting wisdom from one generation to another is not a one-time event! It requires constant maintenance. A heart once instructed in wisdom is not set for life. Reinforcement, repetition, and reminders are all tools we have to use. Due to the nature of our hearts we have to constantly learn, relearn, and learn again the wisdom of God.

### **Guard Your Heart**

Now we come to the heart of the passage! “Keep your heart with all vigilance.” The NASB reads, “Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flows the springs of life.” The KJV, “Keep your heart, with all diligence, for out of it are the issues of life.” And the NIV, “Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life.” A working paraphrase of the Hebrew would read, “More than all else, closely guard, watch, and protect your heart.”

Now this verse sort of just stops you in your tracks. It grabs you and shakes you and says forcefully, “Think about this! Don’t rush on to the next verse too quickly! This is really important! Vital! In fact, I agree with one commentator whom I read this week who said, “If there were one verse I could give to Christian young people, it would be this verse!” Do this above everything else, watch your heart!!! But what does it mean? How do we apply it. Well, let’s talk about this verse in-depth.

### **What are we supposed to do?**

So what are we to do? We are to guard, protect, keep a close watch on our hearts. We are to be like a guard at a building—not letting anything or anybody into a building. We have a nephew who works as a guard for Brinks Security and his job is to guard a lot of money. Or we might think of a running back or a quarterback near the end of the game

in possession of the ball and the lead. They are to protect the ball—not fumble it, just run with it but whatever happens don't cough it up! Guard it! Keep it!

So, God doesn't want us to let our guard down when it comes to our heart. We can't just let any idea, motivation or desire to enter into our heart. How differently would your life look if you guarded your heart as careful as you guard your home or something that you really value? You watch that, you make sure you have something of value secured well. You don't want anyone just walking into your house at any time, so you take appropriate measures to guard your house. You expect your bank to guard your money well. You protect that electronic device you have—an ipod or smartphone.

But do you guard your heart well? Do you expose your mind, your attitudes, your feelings and your wills to impurity needlessly. Are you really innocent about evil but wise about good (Romans 16:19)?

### **What is the heart?**

Now that brings up a second question: What is the heart? If we are to guard, watch, and protect our hearts, we had better know what that is? We use the word “heart” in so many ways. You go into the doctor's office after a stress test and your doctor tells you, “If you don't change some of your habits, you are going to have open heart surgery!” A starry-eyed, young girl comes home one day, falls into a chair and shares with her parents about a young man she met and says, “He's the one. I just know it in my heart.” And just about that time godly parents should be saying, “We need to have a heart-to-heart talk, young lady!”

So what does this wise word mean, “Keep your heart with all vigilance!” Well, your heart is who you really are, your innermost being. Your heart includes your feelings, desires, affections, motives, will, mind, convictions, and dreams. The heart is who you are! So guard your desires! Keep a close watch on what you love! Protect your motives! Guard your will, mind! Keep your convictions carefully! The “heart” includes your mind, emotions, and will (3:3; 15:15, 11:20).

Now, the heart belongs to God, but He wants you to guard it! Guard your desires, affections, will, thoughts. Can you think of any more important task? I can't!

Now we saw this idea of the heart first back in chapter 2. There are 77 times that the word “heart” appears in Proverbs in the ESV and about 875 times in the entire Bible. So one thing is pretty certain: And if he cares about it, so should you.

Let's just take a look at what God says about your heart in Proverbs 3:1, “My son, do not forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commandments.” The Word of God is to penetrate, subdue, influence, and reign in every thought you have, every flame of passion you experience, every word you utter that leaps from your affections and every choice you make, both contemplated and embraced!

Look at Proverbs 3:3, “Let not steadfast love and faithfulness forsake you; bind them around your neck; write them on the tablet of your heart.” There is a lot of hype surrounding a new computer product that Apple computer is introducing in a couple of weeks called, at least at the present, the Tablet. It will be a powerful computing tool that will fall somewhere in between the i-phone and the laptop computer that, if it catches on, will be the next fade. But there's already a much more powerful computing device that each of already own: the tablet called our heart! And through constant and determined meditation and application of God's Word, we are to be writing God's truth on this tablet every day!

Then look at verse 5, probably the best known and most loved verse in all Proverbs, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart!” With all your inner being!

In this chapter, we read, “Let your heart hold fast my words” (4:4) and “keep [my words] within your heart” (v. 21) and now, “Keep your heart!” Now listen to me, young and old, nothing is more essential than guarding your heart! Nothing!

Now, I want you to see something here. This father isn't interested in mere behavior modification! That was the rage years ago among child psychologists, even among some of the most well-known Christian authors, but that isn't what the biblical author is after. He is not just trying to keep his son from destructive behavior—he want to shepherd this young man's heart! He is calling out for his heart! That's what parents should do: ask your children, “Do I have your heart? I am speaking to your heart! Who has your heart? The heart of matter is the matter of the heart!”

So, fortify your heart with truth and wisdom. Watch all its secret designs and motivations. Combine your heart's desires in service to God. Be earnest, constant, and persevering!

### **Why is it so important to guard your heart?**

So next question is, “Why is it important to guard your heart?” Answer: “for from it flows the springs of life.” What is in your heart flows throughout your entire life. It touches every corner of your life. The word used for “springs of life” elsewhere depicts the farthest boundary of someone's land (like in Joshua 16:13) so it describes the truth that your heart penetrates and influences everything you do and everywhere you go!

In John 7:38, Jesus says that if you have the spirit of God within you, your heart will overflow with living water!

So how important is your heart? Well, how important is your physical heart? It pumps blood to your extremities! You can live without some of your organs and without some of your body parts, but you can't live without your heart! And you can't live for God without guarding your heart!

Why should you guard your heart because the heart is the source of evil. as well as the seat of what is good. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts,

sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.” (Mark 7:21-23). But the heart is also where repentance is expressed, faith arises, and Christ abides. And a third reason to guard the heart is because what's in our heart, faith or unbelief in Christ, is what determines our **everlasting destiny**. Guard your heart, for man looks on the outward appearance but God looks on the heart.

So as Pastor John Kitchen points out, "There is nothing of greater value on this earth than the condition of your heart. There is no single action that will more directly affect the outcome and quality of your life than the guarding of your heart." There is not a more reliable predictor of your ultimate end than what you expose your heart to.

### **Are there various kinds of hearts?**

Now, the Bible indicates there are various kinds of hearts. The Bible speaks positively of a pure, glad, willing, stirred, wise, seeking, servant, whole, repentant, perfect, sound, or merry heart. On the other hand, it's possible to possess an evil, hardened, hateful, sorrowful, discouraged, obstinate, forgetful, proud, deceived, double, foolish, broken, wounded, unbelieving, envious, bitter, angry heart. And that's just a sampling.

### **How do you know what is in your heart?**

So, how would you describe your heart this morning? How do you know what is in your heart? Well there are several indicators such as the following:

- You can tell what is in your heart by what you **talk** about most of the time “Out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks” (Matthew 12:34)
- You can tell what is in your heart by what you **think** about most of the time: “As a man thinks in his heart so is he” (Proverbs 23:7, KJV)
- You can tell what is your heart by how you spend your discretionary money: “For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” (Luke 12:34)

So when we use the word heart, we are talking about **life and love**; that is what do you live for and what do you love the most?

Which leads to one final question: what do you live for? What do you love most? What should we live for and love most? What should consume our lives? What kind of heart pleases God?

### **What kind of heart should I be cultivating?**

Let me just give three answers briefly. Ask yourself if these govern your heart? First, **a heart for the Word of God!** Do you love the Word of God? Do you value the Word of God as highly as God does? How much is that? God says, “He magnifies His Word above His name!” (Psalm 138:2). Do you believe the Word of God is sufficient to meet the deepest needs of your life? If you do you will love the gospel! The pure, unadulterated gospel of Jesus Christ. You will believe that the gospel is the power of

God unto salvation (Romans 1:16) to everyone who believes! You won't add to, embellish or be ashamed of the gospel.

Your spiritual health depends on guarding your heart against error by filling your heart with a love for the Word of God. Do you love the Word? Do you hunger for this Word? Do you thirst for God's Word? Do you talk about God's Word? Do you think about it? Do you have spiritual heartburn for the Word? Do you study it? Memorize it? Meditate on it?

Secondly, do you have **a heart for the holiness of God**? By holiness, we might think of God's separateness—his transcendence! That's what the angelic beings cry out about continually according to the beatific vision of Isaiah 6 when Isaiah entered the temple and God revealed Himself as the angels antiphonally sang forth, "Holy, Holy, Holy!" to which Isaiah responded, "Woe is me!" which meant "Curse me, punish me, I am wicked, vile and unworthy! (If a Christian talked like this today, we'd say he had a poor self-image and send him to a therapist). "I'm undone—I'm disintegrating, crumbling, and falling apart." And I have a dirty mouth—which was really a bad thing for a prophet who was the mouthpiece of God to the people to have.

Oh, brothers and sisters, how we need to cultivate and in some cases recover a heart for the holiness of God! We need to stop playing games with his holiness. If we had hearts for his holiness, what we laugh at and tolerate on our TV and movie choices would change, what we read might be different, what attitudes we coddle, and what language we use would be transformed. And we wouldn't hide behind the excuses of "Well, it's not as bad as what so-and-so does" or "Well, that's just the way I am!" Oh beloved, let us love in our hearts the holiness of God!

Let's remember what David knew, "If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened" (Psalm 66:18). Let's not kid ourselves that we serve God with any effectiveness in ministry if we don't take our sin seriously. Guard your hearts!

And finally God loves **a heart for real commitment to Him**! Do you have a heart fully committed to God? You have one of three types of hearts when it comes to commitment to God? You are like one of the first three kings of Israel. You might be like Saul who had no heart really for God! Secondly, you might be like David who had a fully committed heart for God. But the majority of professing Christians are much too like Solomon who had a divided heart for God.

Now King Solomon loved many foreign women, along with the daughter of Pharaoh: Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Sidonian, and Hittite women. . . He had 700 wives, princesses, and 300 concubines. And his wives turned away his heart. For when Solomon was old his wives turned away his heart after other gods, and his heart was not wholly true to the Lord his God, as was the heart of David his father. (1 Kings 11:1, 3, 4)

Are you a man after God's own heart like David? A man fully committed, though still a sinner, to the work of God! I think far too many of us have been vaccinated with a mild dose of convenient service to God so that we don't have a heart full of zeal for God!

Years ago, shortly after the Iron Curtain fell in Europe, some Russian believers visited a Christian church in America. After a few weeks, they asked the pastor, "How can you minister here?" He said, "What do you mean by that?" They responded, "Well, in our country no one pretends to be a Christian. They put Christians in jail, so no one fakes it. Every time the Word is given, people come because they are so hungry for it." I am sure the same could be said today by the mainland Chinese believers if they were to visit America.

Oh for a heart that truly loves the Word of God, loves the holiness of God, and loves being wholly committed to God.

### **What else should we be guarding?**

You know there are four more verses in chapter 4 that really go along with this theme of guarding our hearts. We don't have time to develop these today much, yet they we will devote some more time to some of these issues in the coming weeks. For to fulfill the command to guard our hearts that entails that we guard some other parts of our bodies.

Think of it like as a **city under attack**. You are in charge of the defense of the city and your instructions from your military superior are "Guard it, protect it, repel all attacks at any cost!" You know there are several ways the enemy could take the city. In ancient times, for example, they had several **gates** that lead in and out of the city so they protected those gates.

In John Bunyan's classic book **The Holy War**, you know that the war for Mansoul is won or lost at the various gates, he describes as "ear gate and eye gate and so on." That is what our junior age Wednesday Kids' meeting is all about this year. And we teach our children the little song--"Oh, be careful, little ears what you hear, oh be careful little hands what you do, oh be careful little eyes what you see, and so on."

Well, here it is in this text. **Guard your ears.** "Be attentive to my words, Incline your ear to my sayings." (v. 20). Listen to sound words, wise words. Don't listen to the counsel of the ungodly! Evaluate everything you listen to, including your music, by the standard of the Word of God.

**Guard you mouth.** "Put away from you crooked speech and put devious talk far from you." (v. 24) "Crooked" describes that which twists and distorts reality, lies, half-truths, white lies, deception. Gossip, slander or harmful speech is crooked speech. "Devious talk" speaks of perverted speech, clean and course language, swearing, cursing. These things ought not be on our lips and as much as possible we should flee such speech when others begin to talk like this.

**Guard your eyes!** (v. 25). "Let your eyes look directly forward, and your gaze be straight before you." This could be talking about your literal eyes. What you see has a tremendous effect on your soul! I will repeat that, "What you see has a tremendous effect on your soul." This is a "no-brainer" as they say. Which is why Hollywood spends billions of dollars every year on special effects and producing their fare.

Once you put something before your eyes, you will never be satisfied with that alone. “Never satisfied are the eyes of man.” Our eyes are assaulted every day with provocative and evil images. We must guard them—especially young men! And it isn't the first look that kills, sometimes you can't avoid that, but it is the second, lingering look that does. Jesus deals with this very directly, “If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell.” (Matthew 5:29). Job's strategy is even more essential today than when he was alive in terms of sheer number of attacks, “I have made a covenant with my eyes.”

Your eyes are the video projector that displays what it sees on the screen of your soul. Oh, be careful eyes what you see!

This verse could also be speaking metaphorically, poetically of the path of your life. In other words, focus on your purpose and your goals and God's calling in your life. Don't get diverted or distracted in this world. It was said of Jesus that he was about his Father's business and that when his time had come, he set his face resolutely toward Jerusalem (Luke 9:51). Paul urges us to keep our eyes on the “prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus!” Commentator Franz Delitzsch notes that “purposeless, curious staring about operates upon the soul, always decentralizing and easily defiling it.” Discover God's purpose for your life and fulfill it! Guard your purpose! So many young people lack purpose in their lives! That is dangerous! They are just sort of meandering through life with no purpose, no direction, no goals, no vision. That is not wisdom's path.

Finally, **guard your feet.** “Ponder the path of your feet, then all your ways will be sure. Do not swerve to the right or to the left; turn your foot away from evil.” (Proverbs 4:26-27). Guard what you do and where you go in your life. One false step and it could prove fatal to your soul. Keep from being captivated by competing interests in your life, the easy road, the entertaining lifestyle. And don't try to take moral shortcuts off the path of your life. Moral shortcuts always end in disaster. Keep away from evil! Turn from it! Avoid every evil path. Focus all your energy on the right path!

Pondering the path of your feet is a work of a lifetime. You take steps every day. Guarding your heart is a daily duty, a lifetime of effort, not just a single decision made today and sealed forever.

Oh, I pray that this message might be like M & M's today! My prayer is that these message on living wisely in a foolish world—in a broken world might melt in our hearts, not in our heads.

To assist fathers in leading their families in doing this, I have posted on the blog today 66 Proverbs that deal with the heart. I would encourage you to take the next six days and spend a few moments with your families reading these Proverbs. Go home and print them off. If the father is unable to do this, then mom you do this. There are a few copies in the back if you don't have access to the Internet or can't print them off.

But it is so easy to fill in the blanks and memorize these aphorisms about our hearts, but are these truths in your heart? Where is your heart today? Who has your heart today? What are you putting into your heart? What is really the love of your life? Is the path of your life headed in the right direction? Or are you swerving off God's path for your heart? Which gateway to your heart is most vulnerable? Where is the battle the fiercest? Where do you need to call in for reinforcements? Are you keeping your heart with all vigilance?

I'm not asking which one of us needs to change this day in regard to guarding our hearts. We all need to change. What I am asking is, "Who among us will change? Who will see the need to change and experience the grace of God in the change He is calling us to? Who will truly ponder the path of their feet and stop swerving today?"

May each hearer today pray, "Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!" Let us live coram Deo, before the face of God!