

My son, be attentive to my words; incline your ear to my sayings. Let them not escape from your sight; keep them within your heart. For they are life to those who find them, and healing to all their flesh. Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life. Put away from you crooked speech, and put devious talk far from you. Let your eyes look directly forward, and your gaze be straight before you. 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 4:20–27)

Introduction

In early September 2006, the sad news reached the world of the death of Steve “Crocodile Hunter” Irwin. The news was shocking, not because a man had died (for we all have an appointment with death), or that the cause of his death was a wild animal (for the odds weighed pretty heavily in that direction), but because of the animal by which he met his demise. Irwin’s was death by stingray.

Stingray venom has the ability to cause tremendous pain, but the sting is rarely fatal. It is estimated that perhaps as few as thirty deaths have ever been credited to stingrays, but the reality is that no one actually knows, because the occurrences are so rare that no one has ever really bothered to do the research.

Irwin was killed, not because he was allergic to stingray venom or because he developed an infection after the attack, but because the fish pierced his heart, causing massive internal trauma. Stingrays are typically not aggressive, and most attacks happen when a swimmer accidentally steps on a ray, or when a fisherman finds one caught in his net and tries to remove it. People swimming with stingrays typically have no reason to guard their heart, but in Irwin’s case, a freak attack to his heart ended his life.

According to the World Health Organisation, the worldwide leading cause of death among humans is heart disease of some description. The heart is also the leading killer spiritually, and Proverbs 4:20–27 points us to this truth.

The Injunction to a Guarded Heart

The centrepiece of this section, around which the rest of the verses revolve, is v. 23: “Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life.” The inspired command is found in the first part of the verse: “Keep your heart with all vigilance.”

The word translated “keep” means to guard, protect, or maintain. It assumes that the thing kept will be attacked, and that the keeper should be sufficiently aware of the attacks that he will be on guard. The word translated “vigilance” is generally used in the Old Testament to speak of someone in custody and therefore guarded by an officer assigned to that task. The picture is of keeping the heart caged and protected against the attacks that it will face.

The spiritual battle that rages around us is, in reality, a battle for the heart. God wants your heart; so does Satan. Whoever or whatever has your heart has your devotion.

Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:3–5). We sometimes imagine that the “strongholds” that we are called to “destroy” are the strongholds of false religion and unbiblical worldviews held by the world. There may be an application there, but Paul is primarily talking about the “strongholds” that exist within your own heart and mind. The heart is the battleground on which we tear down strongholds.

The Importance of a Guarded Heart

It is important to understand *why* the battle for the heart is so important: because “from it flow the springs of life” (v. 23b).

This chapter speaks much about the embrace of biblical ethics (see vv. 10–19), but these ethics must flow from a guarded heart. Everything we think, say, or do is a manifestation of what is in the heart. Whatever is at the source will be produced. Remove wisdom and godliness from the heart, and wisdom and godliness will soon cease from the life. “If we pollute that wellspring, the infection will spread; before long, hidden appetites will become open sins and public shame” (Wiersbe).

The principle here is that sin is always a heart issue, and it must always be dealt with at the heart level. Our sinful words, thoughts, and actions flow from a corrupted heart. It is all good and well to tackle words, thoughts, and actions symptomatically, but if we do not deal with the heart issue, our eyes, ears, minds, and hands will find a way around whatever protections we put in place.

Let me use a concrete example to illustrate. Carl Trueman suggests that “Internet pornography is probably the number one pastoral problem in the world today.” Statistics

suggest that he is correct. In early 2017, the largest pornographic website in the world reported that, combined, users had watched 4.6 billion hours of porn the previous calendar year. Statisticians inform us that the average child is exposed to explicit pornographic content on the Internet by the age of eleven, and that, during the teen years, 93% of boys and 62% of girls are exposed to pornography. Sixty-one percent of porn is viewed on a mobile phone.

Parents of teens and preteens (22% of porn viewed by under-18s is actually viewed by children under the age of ten!) are understandably concerned about what their children are exposed to. (I must stress that this should be a concern for *children*, not only for boys!) One of the most frequent questions I hear concerns accountability or parental software. People—parents, in particular, from my standpoint—want to know what preventative software or apps they can install that will guard their children from pornography. *Covenant Eyes* is helpful in this regard. It can be installed on desktop and mobile devices and not only blocks objectionable content but sends periodic updates to a designated accountability partner. There are ways to set up your Internet connection at home so that it blocks adult-themed websites, and even devices you can purchase to pair with your modem at home that will control the amount of time and the content to which devices on your WiFi have access.

Software and settings and devices are wonderful. They play an important and helpful role. But they only address the symptom, not the problem. If you put all those things in place without addressing the heart, you have not sufficiently tackled the problem. Your children—or your spouse, or your friends—need to understand that the battle with pornography (eighty percent of people who admit to watching porn confess that they know it's not right) is a *heart* issue. You must guard the heart if you will properly protect what flows from it.

Guarding your heart begins with understanding its deceptive power. Jeremiah wrote, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?” (Jeremiah 17:9). The human heart is prone to all sorts of spiritual diseases. “The Bible warns us to avoid a double heart (Ps. 12:2), a hard heart (Prov. 28:14), a proud heart (21:4), an unbelieving heart (Heb. 3:12), a cold heart (Matt. 24:12), and an unclean heart (Ps. 51:10)” (Wiersbe). The heart is so “desperately sick” that what we actually need is a new heart. And this is precisely what God promises through the gospel of Jesus Christ. The new covenant is the promise of a new heart. “I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (Jeremiah 31:33).

“I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in my statutes and keep my rules and obey them” (Ezekiel 11:19–20).

“I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules” (Ezekiel 36:26–27).

If you want to guard your heart, as Proverbs 4:23 exhorts, it begins with acknowledging the depravity of your heart, and praying to God for a new heart through repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Solomon wrote these words to his son whom, he assumed, was committed to following Yahweh. The unbeliever can fence behaviour but can't really guard the heart in a gospel sense. It is only through the gospel that the believer can truly guard the heart.

The Implications of a Guarded Heart

Solomon was not content with abstractions. In the rest of the section – vv. 20–22, 24–27 – he shows exactly what a guarded heart looks like. The things of which he writes here are both the *evidence* of a guarded heart and the *means* to a continued guarding of the heart. He gives four implications of a guarded heart.

Guard Your Ears

First, in vv. 20–22, the guarded heart results in guarded ears – and guarded ears maintain a guard on the heart: “My son, be attentive to my words; incline your ear to my sayings. Let them not escape from your sight; keep them within your heart. For they are life to those who find them, and healing to all their flesh” (vv. 20–22).

These verses are all about the ears, and how the ears respond to the truth of God's word. There is essentially a threefold response called for.

Biblical Attentiveness

First, Solomon wanted his son to be attentive to the word: “My son, be attentive to my words; incline your ear to my sayings” (v. 20). At the most basic level, a guarded heart produces ears that listen to God's words, and listening to God's word helps us to maintain a guard on the heart.

When I speak of attentiveness, I am speaking of the simple act of actually exposing yourself to the Bible. When you sit in church, listen to what the preacher is saying, rather

than thinking about the Sunday afternoon lunch or the Sunday evening movie or the week ahead. Listen rather than browsing Instagram. There is a man standing behind a pulpit, to whom God has given a burden to deliver to his people. Listen to him.

We are attentive to God's truth when we read—or listen to—the Bible. If you completely cut yourself off from any exposure to God's truth, you have not guarded your heart, and you are not helping yourself to do so.

Biblical Absorption

Our exposure to God's truth must, however, go beyond mere attentiveness. As we expose ourselves to the truth, we should pray for the ability to absorb the truth: "Let them not escape from your sight; keep them within your heart" (v. 21).

As you gather with the church, or as you open your Bible to read it for yourself, do so prayerfully, asking God to help you understand and absorb what you are exposed to. If you forget what you have heard the minute you leave the auditorium or the moment you close your Bible (app), you have not guarded your heart and are not helping yourself to do so.

Biblical Application

Once you have prayerfully exposed yourself to God's truth, and have absorbed what you have heard or read, it is time to put it into action: "For they are life to those who find them, and healing to all their flesh" (v. 22). If you are not applying the truths you have heard and absorbed, you haven't properly guarded your heart, and you are not helping yourself to do so.

As Christians, we want to affirm the inspiration and authority of the Bible. "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God" (2 Timothy 3:16). But it does not help to simply affirm that if it does not change you. The inspired word of God has a purpose: It is "profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16–17). If the inspired word is not changing you—giving you spiritual "life" and "healing"—it is because you haven't applied what you ought to apply. God's word is not designed to only fill your head with knowledge and doctrine, but to change your heart in devotion to the God who gave it.

Guard Your Mouth

Second, according to v. 24, the guarded heart results in a guarded mouth—and a guarded mouth maintains a guard on the heart: "Put away from you crooked speech, and put devious talk far from you" (v. 24).

When the Pharisees were offended that Jesus did not insist on eating with washed hands, he replied,

Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person. But to eat with unwashed hands does not defile anyone.

(Matthew 15:17–20)

We will encounter more of this as we journey through Proverbs, but Solomon had a great deal to say about “crooked” and “devious” talk. Wisdom produces wholesome, edifying speech; folly produces crooked and devious talk. If you do not guard your heart, you will not guard your tongue. The way you talk to others and about others says a lot about your devotion to the Lord.

Guard Your Eyes

Third, in v. 25, we learn that the guarded heart results in guarded eyes – and guarded eyes maintain a guard on the heart: “Let your eyes look directly forward, and your gaze be straight before you” (v. 25).

The picture here is of a person keeping his or her eyes firmly fixed on a goal. When you are pursuing a certain course of action, you cannot allow yourself to be distracted by looking around you. “The discerning sets his face toward wisdom, but the eyes of a fool are on the ends of the earth” (17:24).

In May 1954, Roger Bannister became the first man to run a sub-four-minute mile. A month later, John Landy broke his record. In August that year, the two men lined up alongside each other to compete against each other in what was termed “The Miracle Mile” and “The Race of the Century.” Landy was ahead as the two men approached the finished line, but as he reached the end he began to think about Bannister’s position. Just before he crossed the line, he allowed himself to glance over his left shoulder, and as he did so Bannister cruised past him to win the race. Reflecting on that moment, Landy later said, “I would have won the race if I hadn’t looked back: if I hadn’t taken my eyes off the goal.”

A guarded heart will keep your eyes fixed on the goal, and keeping your gaze on the goal will help you to guard your heart. Remember Lot’s wife! As a believer, your goal is Christlikeness. If you take your eyes off Christ, you will falter. Oh, believer, you will finish

the race—God’s grace will see to that—but you may not finish as strongly as you could have.

Guard Your Feet

Fourth, and finally, the guarded heart will result in guarded feet—and guarded feet will help to maintain a guarded heart: “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” (vv. 26–27).

To “ponder” something is to mentally weigh it. It implies careful attention and therefore, in this instance, dedication to stay on the right path. Like Christian in *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, there is a path set before us on which we must stay, but there are all sorts of people and things that would distract us and cause us to wander off the path.

A guarded heart enables us to keep our eyes fixed firmly on the path before us, but if we do not guard our heart, we will find ourselves easily swayed to alternate paths.

Sin has its own path, but it is the path of death. The forbidden woman in chapter 5 “does not ponder the path of life; her ways wander, and she does not know it” (5:6). “There is a way [or path] that seems right to a man, but its end is the way [or path] of death” (14:12). Or in the words of Jesus, “Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way [path] is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way [path] is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few” (Matthew 7:13–14).

You must guard your heart if you will walk on the path of life. If you don’t, you will walk on the path of death, the path of destruction. The question, in many ways, is, which path will you walk? The answer seems obvious, doesn’t it? Who would choose to walk the path of destruction rather than the path of life? And yet, sadly, many choose just that—because the path to destruction is easier and, often, more exciting.

Will you choose the path of life? I hope you will. What *is* the path of life? It is the path that is offered through Christ. We are all born travelling the road to destruction, but in the gospel God sets before us the offer of life. At the cross, Jesus took upon himself the destruction that we deserved so that he could offer us the life that our hearts yearn for. The only way to receive that life is through the Lord Jesus Christ—by confessing your sin and, with faith that he is able to save you, calling upon his name for forgiveness.

If you are on the path to death, ponder your fate and then ask God to set you on the path to life through Jesus Christ.

If you are in Christ, then carefully watch the path on which you tread. Guard your heart and stay on the right path.

Conclusion

Solomon wants us to understand that our heart directs everything we do. “By using ears, eyes, and heart, the teacher is exhorting the whole person to receive the traditions” (Ross). Your heart will direct your ears, your eyes, your mouth, and your feet. Conversely, by guarding your ears, eyes, mouth, and feet, you are guarding your heart.

Will you recognise that your heart is prone to wander? And, recognising that, will you pray to God for the grace you need to guard your heart and life so that you can stay on the path to life and live in a way that is honouring to Christ and his gospel?

AMEN