

"KEEPING THE HEART"

I. Introduction

- A. Up to this point in our study of Proverbs we have been working our way through the book in a verse-by-verse manner.
 - 1. But as I noted at the beginning of this series, the nature of Proverbs makes it difficult to preach straight through the entire book.
 - 2. For this reason, we are going to skip over some material and look at this passage at the end of chapter 4.
 - 3. These verses focus upon an important biblical theme: the crucial place of the heart in the godly life.
- B. As you can see, the term "heart" appears twice in our passage, first in verse 21 and again in verse 23.
 - 1. Another term that is repeated in this passage is one that appears in the first and last verses, the term that is translated as "incline" in verse 20 and as "swerve" in verse 27.
 - 2. Taken together, these two terms highlight the point that the father is driving home here: it is of the utmost importance that we keep our hearts focused upon the right influences and that we protect them from going after the wrong ones.
 - 3. As we study this passage tonight, we will consider what it means to keep the heart, why it is so important for us to do so, and how we are to go about this all-important work.

II. What It Means to Keep the Heart

- A. Before we focus upon what it means to keep the heart, we need to understand what he is talking about when he father speaks of the heart.

1. This is important, because we tend to think of the heart in terms of a person's emotions.
 2. We are reminded of this when people use phrases like, 'I just know in my heart that it is true,' or 'My heart tells me that this is right.'
 3. This is not what the Bible has in mind when it speaks of the heart.
 4. In the Bible, the heart is the core of a person's life, the thing that governs all of our thoughts and actions.
 5. The heart is the seat of our thinking, feeling, and choosing.
 6. In the words of Old Testament scholar Bruce Waltke, the heart is the center of "all of a person's emotional-intellectual-religious-moral activity." [Waltke, 92]
 7. Your heart is your inner self, the self that you know so well but that is not fully known to anyone else except God.
- B. Because the heart has such a central place in a human being's life, it should not surprise us that the Bible renders a damning verdict upon the heart of fallen man.
1. In the words of the prophet Jeremiah, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?" (Jer. 17:9)
 2. This is why the Bible sometimes describes salvation in terms of being given a new heart.
 3. We see this in Ezekiel 36, where the Lord makes this promise to his people: "And 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." (v. 26)
 4. Salvation brings about a genuine change of heart in a person's life.

5. Your renewed heart is the source of your faith in Christ and of all of the love and service that you render to God.
- C. This helps us to understand why the father would instruct his son to “Keep your heart with all vigilance.”
1. The Puritan pastor John Flavel wrote an entire book on this statement, a book in which he explores this subject with the kind of meticulousness for which the Puritans are so famous.
 2. He begins his study with this helpful explanation of what is meant by the phrase ‘keeping the heart’: “The heart of man is his worst part before it is regenerated, and the best afterward; it is the seat of principles, and the foundation of actions. The eye of God is, and the eye of the Christian ought to be, principally fixed upon it. The greatest difficulty in conversion is to win the heart *to* God; and the greatest difficulty after conversion, is to keep the heart *with* God. Here lies the very force and stress of religion; here is that which makes the way to life a narrow way, and the gate to heaven a strait gate. ... *The keeping and right managing of the heart in every condition, is one great business of a Christian’s life.*” [John Flavel, *Keeping the Heart*, 13, 16]
 3. If you are a Christian, then God has given you a gift beyond compare.
 4. He has removed your old heart of stone, a heart that was dead in sin and condemned to hell.
 5. In its place he has given you a new heart, a heart that is enlivened and indwelt by the Holy Spirit.
 6. And now that you have been given this new heart, it is incumbent upon you to keep and cultivate it.
 7. The fact that you owe your new heart entirely to God’s free grace does not mean that you are free to neglect this extraordinary gift.

8. You need to maintain and nurture it if its fruit is going to be seen in your life.

III. The Importance of Keeping the Heart

- A. This brings us to our second point: the importance of keeping the heart.
 1. We do not need to spend a lot of time on this point because it is pretty straightforward.
 2. This is evident by the father's words in the second half of verse 23, where he says that "the springs of life" flow from the heart.
 3. You may recall that Jesus said something very similar in the Gospels: "The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks." (Lk. 6:45)
 4. The reason why we have to pay such careful attention to our hearts is because the heart is the origin of all that we think, say, and do.
- B. If you tend your heart well, everything else will fall into place in your life as a Christian.
 1. As J.C. Ryle once put it, the heart is "the main thing in religion."
 2. If you want to grow in holiness, you need to keep a close watch upon your heart.
 3. But if you neglect your heart, it won't really matter what else you do.
 4. You cannot become a godly man or a godly woman by merely dealing with externals.

5. True godliness is a matter of the heart.
- C. Don't be content with outward matters.
1. Give attention to your heart.
 2. Examine it frequently.
 3. Ask yourself, how much of my heart is filled with the grace and knowledge of Christ?
 4. Ask, how much of my heart is given to the motivations and interests of my fallen nature?
 5. Be honest in your self-assessment, for such honesty is not a source of despair for the Christian.
 6. On the contrary, it only keeps driving us back to Christ.

IV. How to Keep the Heart

- A. This brings us to our third point: how to go about this work of keeping the heart.
1. Our passage speaks to this in both positive and negative ways.
 2. Positively, the son needs to keep his father's words in his heart.
 3. For us, this means keeping God's truth always before us.
 4. We need to internalize God's Word.
 5. Scripture is life to us.
 6. As Peter said to Jesus, "You have the words of eternal life." (Jn. 6:68)

7. Do not allow yourself to think that the basic truths of the Bible are old and passe.
 8. Don't neglect it because you have heard it all before.
 9. As commentator Derek Kidner reminds us, "a major part of godliness lies in dogged attentiveness to familiar truths." [65]
- B. One of the practices that the Puritans cultivated in order to keep God's truth in the heart is something that J.I. Packer describes as "admonitory meditation."
1. While the phrase might sound intimidating, it simply means talking to yourself in the presence of the Lord.
 2. Remind yourself of the truths that you have learned about God and his ways.
 3. Set yourself straight when you sense that your heart is straying from what you know to be true.
 4. This is something that we often see in the Psalms.
 5. But it is not a practice that comes naturally to many of us in our age of constant distraction and instant results.
 6. J.I. Packer observes: "Would I be wrong, I wonder, to guess that most of us nowadays do very little of this thoughtful inward arguing with ourselves in times of testing? We expect that when inward or outward circumstances expose us to temptation we shall recognize it straight away and be able to banish it with a simple 'no'. But in fact keeping the heart steady, zealous for God's glory and consciously close to Christ is not always so easily done, while our expectation that we shall be able to say 'no' when necessary without inward effort and struggle only shows how unrealistic we are, and how easily we are betrayed into doing wrong and foolish things believing them to be wise and right."

7. The bottom line is that you are going to have to work at it if you want to keep God's words within your heart.
- C. In addition to this positive practice of keeping God's truth always before us, this passage also speaks of things that we need to avoid.
1. First, we need to put away crooked speech and devious talk.
 2. This is important, because your words not only reflect what is inside your heart; they also shape your heart.
 3. Listen again to Derek Kidner: "Superficial habits of talk react on the mind; so that, e.g. cynical chatter, fashionable grumbles, flippancy, half-truths, barely meant in the first place, harden into well-established habits of thought." [65]
 4. Keep your heart by keeping a close watch on the way you speak.
- D. Another important aspect of keeping the heart is being careful about the things that we look at.
1. The father tells the son, "Let your eyes look directly forward, and your gaze be straight before you."
 2. This is something that is especially important in our sensuous, image-dominated, pornographic culture.
 3. There are many things in the world today that are readily available for us to look at that no Christian should ever look at.
 4. Remember that your heart is shaped by the things that your senses bring into it.
 5. If you look at things that are impure, then you will cultivate impurity in your heart.
- E. Lastly, we need to keep focused on the straight way.

1. The father says, "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."
 2. There are all sorts of side-paths in life.
 3. Many of them seem attractive for a time.
 4. But in the end they will always lead you astray.
 5. Keep your feet on the strait and narrow path, for it is the only path of life.
- F. One other thing to note about keeping the heart is that it is a constant duty.
1. It is something to which you always need to be giving your attention.
 2. If you let down your guard, you are placing your heart in danger.
 3. In his book on keeping the heart, John Flavel says that we need to go about this work in the time of prosperity, the time of adversity, the time of Zion's troubles, the time of danger and public distraction, the time of outward wants, the season of duty, when receiving injuries and abuses from men, when we meet with great trials, the hour of temptation, the time of doubting and of spiritual darkness, when sufferings for religion are laid upon us, and when we are warned by sickness that our dissolution is at hand.
 4. That is a pretty comprehensive list.
 5. This shows us that the duty of keeping the heart is a duty from which we should never rest.
 6. This is what the father means when he says that it is to be done "with all vigilance."

V. Conclusion

- A. While we certainly need to be vigilant in keeping our hearts, we can take comfort in knowing that our Lord keeps far better watch over our hearts than we do.
- B. As it says in the epistle of Jude, your God “is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy.” (Jude 24)
- C. And as Peter says in his first epistle, it is by *God’s* power that we are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. (1 Pet. 1:5)
- D. Here again is John Flavel: “There is so much corruption remaining in good men that they would certainly plunge themselves under much guilt if providence did not take greater care for them than they do for themselves. Even though they take great care in keeping themselves and daily watch their hearts and ways, yet such is the deceitfulness of sin, that if providence did not lay road blocks in the way, sin would entangle and defile them more frequently than it does... We must thankfully own God’s providence in this, and not impute our escape as a mere accident, or the result of our own watchfulness and wisdom. On the other hand, do not tempt providence by trusting in it alone.” [cited in *Voices from the Past*, 357]
- E. You will never keep a perfect watch over your heart in this age, but this does not mean that you should not be vigilant about this work.
- F. In the words of the apostle Paul, “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling”, even as you trust that “it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” (Phil. 2:12-13)