

Resolving to Put First Things First

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Proverbs

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Bible Text: Proverbs 4:23
Preached on: Sunday, January 1, 2023

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We will look at Proverbs, Proverbs 4. I wanted, before we resumed, Lord willing, next week in 1 Peter, to look at one verse this morning that the Lord put on my heart. I think it's a good passage to look at as we begin a new year. It's Proverbs 4:23 The new year is a time where we reflect, we take stock, look back over the last year with sometimes feelings of joyful nostalgia, other times regret, a sense of understanding of things that have been lost, the people. It's a time also to look ahead, to recalibrate, to reset our direction, to refocus. We think about things we'd like to accomplish in the next year, projects we'd like to undertake. It's a time to reevaluate priorities and to try to live in light of those priorities, a time for making resolutions and things like that. As Christians, it's something that we can take advantage of as well in terms of thinking biblically about this new year that God has given us. Each day is a gift, so how can we use it for his glory?

So I want to talk to you this morning about the heart and about the importance of the heart. The verse is really straightforward. Proverbs 4:23. It says,

23 Watch over your heart with all diligence, For from it flow the springs of life.

Let's pray together.

Father, we praise You and exalt Your name. Lord, we acknowledge that we are Your creation, made in Your image for Your glory and those of us who have come to know Your Son as our Savior and Lord, we doubly belong to You, Lord. You have redeemed us and so we pray that You would bless us now by Your Holy Spirit and through Your word apply these things to our hearts that we might walk in Your truth for the glory of Christ. We pray this in His name. Amen.

So "Resolving to Put First Things First" will be the title this morning. Resolving to put first things first, and what this text tells us is that the first, the item of first importance to God is the heart. "Watch over your heart with all diligence." Before we unpack that exhortation, I want to just put it in context biblically. The heart is something that the Bible talks continually about. About a thousand times in Scripture this word is used, Old and New Testament, to speak of the inner man. What is the heart? That's important for us to define it. When the Bible speaks of the heart, it's not speaking of the physical organ

that pumps blood throughout the body. It's speaking of the spiritual organ that regulates the soul, the inner man, the center of our personhood spiritually is the heart. And the Bible speaks of that continually. It's used synonymously. There's some overlap between the word "heart" and "soul," the word "heart" and "spirit." The heart, as we look at the Bible, we see that the heart does things. You read Scripture carefully. You observe that the heart thinks. It's where thinking happens, thoughts happen in the heart according to Scripture. That inner man, the Bible speaks of the heart, contains the mind. Jesus rebukes those who are watching him as he is getting ready to heal the man that's been lowered through the ceiling. Remember, the ceiling tiles are removed, the paralytic is lowered down and Jesus says, "Why are you reasoning these things in your heart?" He knows what they're thinking in their heart. You see, the heart thinks. The heart desires. There's really three main things the heart does biblically: it thinks, it desires. The desires of your heart, the Scripture speaks of continually. So the heart thinks and the heart wants, you might say, and then finally, the heart wills, the purposes and intentions of the heart, Hebrews 4:12. The heart purposes, it intends, it decides.

So you can really say that the mind, the affections and the will all make up the heart biblically, these three components of what the Bible calls the heart, and so that's what the author of Proverbs is talking about. Solomon, as he speaks to his son here, is saying, "Watch over your heart with all diligence," that is, "Watch over your thinking, watch over your affections, watch over your will with all diligence, For this is what everything else flows from." God shows he continually values the heart. Remember when Samuel is told by the Lord, he's to go to the house of Jesse to anoint a new king. Remember when Saul is rejected by God in 1 Samuel and the Lord sends Samuel to Bethlehem and to the home of Jesse because, "One of Jesse's sons I have chosen to be king over Israel." And Samuel walks in and he sees six of the boys there because he tells Jesse, "I need to meet your sons," and he comes into a room there and he sees the oldest and he looks at him and he thinks, "Surely the Lord's anointed is before me." He sees this man. He's so impressive, this young man, the oldest of Jesse's sons and he's convinced in his own mind, in his own heart that this is the one that God's going to anoint. And the Lord says, "No, I have rejected him. I've chosen a man after My own heart." And he says this, "Man looks on the outer appearance. God looks on the heart." You see, God is concerned about the heart. That's what is of first importance to him.

Observation that I was reading someone made earlier that I had never thought about. In Genesis 6:5, this is where God is explaining his reason for destroying all of humanity, save Noah and his three sons and their wives, eight people. Remember, the world is filled with wickedness and violence. It has gotten so depraved, so disgusting that God must wipe it clean and start over with these eight people and he says in Genesis 6:5 the Lord was grieved because the purposes of man's heart were evil, only evil continually. You see what God hated, it wasn't just the acts of violence, what he truly hated was the evil in the heart. And this is so important for us because we tend to focus on the externals. Even as Christians we focus on behavior. Behavior is important to God. Yes, it is. It's important what you say with your mouth, what you do with your hands and your feet. Yes, it's important but it's equally or even more important to God what you do from your heart, because the heart is the source of all the rest.

Think about this. I mean, when you're disciplining, you know, your child or you say, "Watch your mouth," maybe, right? "Hey, watch your mouth. Focus on your mouth. Don't let that come out of your mouth. Bite your tongue. Stop hitting your brother." Those are all good suggestions, all important things, all have their place in being moved toward righteousness, right, but the problem is we stop there too easily. We just reform behavior and we don't remember that it's the heart and this verse says you and I must focus on our hearts if we're to offer to God a life that is pleasing to him. Now, we only do that by grace. We have to be saved. We have to have a new heart. We have to be regenerated first, right? God has to give you a new heart. Jesus alone can do that. You go to him in the promises of the gospel that he's everything that you need, that he died in your place, that he paid your sin debt, that he has given you in exchange righteousness. As Bill was talking about earlier, we give, our sins are taken to the cross and he gives us his righteousness and he gives us through the gospel, through the power of Christ's death and resurrection, he gives us a new heart. He takes out the heart of stone and gives you a heart of flesh, Ezekiel 36:24 and following. This what the new birth is all about.

So you have to have a new heart but then the Christian life is continuing to cultivate a heart for God. I'm reading a really helpful book by an English Puritan, John Flavel, "Keeping the Heart: How to Maintain Your Love for God." He says that the greatest difficulty in conversion – listen to this – 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. And that is the business of Christian life, to keep the heart with God, and this is what this passage calls us to do, to keep the heart.

Now, what I want us to do as we unpack this, we're going to have three points. The first is the exhortation. The exhortation. Let's look exactly at what the Scripture exhorts us to do. It's a call to action. It's actually a command. It's an imperative. The Lord wants us to take action, though. So what is the exhortation? "Watch over." The key phrase, I'm reading the New American Standard, is contained in a Hebrew verb that the text translates "watch over." Watch over. This word means to guard. The NIV translates it that way. "To keep," the ESV, King James translates it that way. It does mean "to watch; to keep; to guard." It has the idea of protecting from outside threats, to watch over a city, to be a watchman for a city, men on the walls who would watch to warn of potential threats.

So watch means to protect but it doesn't just mean protect, it's also used of caring for or maintaining. One of the ways this word is used a number of times is to watch over a vineyard. Well, it's not so much that you're protecting the vineyard from attack, but you are maintaining the vineyard and you're protecting it from things like weeds. You're protecting it from, you know, if you're watering things, if they need to be watered. You're cultivating. So it means to protect and to cultivate or to protect and to maintain and so that's the idea, not just protect your heart, maintain, cultivate your heart like a vineyard. This is not natural for us. As I said, we tend to focus on the externals and so we need to be commanded to focus on the internal.

Now that's the main word here, "watch over," but it's important to note the descriptive phrase "with all diligence." The ESV translates that "with all vigilance." It says, "keep your heart with all vigilance." The NASB that I'm reading, "Watch over your heart with

all diligence." It's interesting, it's an emphatic form. In the Hebrew what you have is you have two words side by side that are near synonyms. Both mean "to guard and to protect and to maintain." Two Hebrew words that are almost identical. They're not the same word but the idea is they both mean to watch over for the purpose of protecting and maintaining. So it's like this, the way it says literally in Hebrew, "Watching over, watching over, watch over." That's what it literally says. "Watching over your heart, watch over your heart." So it's as emphatic as can be and this implies that it's not just something that's not natural for us, but it's something that is difficult for us and so we have to apply great intensity of effort. So he's saying, "Don't watch over casually. No, while you're watching over, be watching over your heart." That's the exhortation.

"Watch over your heart." Now, think about this, that means watch over your thoughts. Remember what the heart is, right? Three things. It's your thinking. It's your wanting. And it's your choosing. You see that your mind, your affections, your will. So what this means is when you're dealing with something, don't just deal with the surface, get below the surface. You know, you lose your temper, say something you shouldn't say, hurtful, sin, it's not enough just to say, "Please forgive me for that," that's important, "Please forgive me for what I've done," but the Lord and that by God's grace deals with the transaction horizontally. We confess to God, "Lord, forgive me. I sinned in speaking in anger. That was evil. What I did, please forgive me. Thank You for the blood of Christ that cleanses me." We confess our sin horizontally but what he's saying here is don't let that be the end of it. Don't let it just be merely a prayer, "Lord, help me not lose my temper anymore." Watch over your heart means you're going to dig into it a little bit. Do you see that? You're not just trying to correct what's on the surface like you're cleaning up a mess on the counter, you're trying to figure out what is it that's actually flowing out into that creating that mess.

And so it means that you're going to spend some time thinking about your heart, what was I wanting that I didn't get that then erupted in anger? Was what I was wanting something that I shouldn't want at all? And so then you're going to repent at a deeper level. Does that make sense? You're trying to look deeper at your thinking. What are the beliefs that I have that need to be changed? What are the affections that I've cultivated through my life and through recent times that have hardened into these desires? What are these commitments and choices that I've made that need to be repented of? That's what it means to watch over your heart with all diligence, be willing to look at the spiritual center of your life.

That's the exhortation. The explanation is the second point. The explanation. Scripture is so good to give us encouragement like this. It tells us why. It doesn't just say watch over your heart with all diligence, he tells you why. The first point was the what, what are we to do? This is the why, the explanation. He explains why it's so important to watch over your heart. "For from it flow the springs of life." From it flow the springs of life. That's the NAS and ESV translate that. The King James says "out of it are the issues of life." The NIV says "everything you do flows from it. Watch over your heart because everything you do flows from it." Here again, the Hebrew word translated "springs of life, springs," in the New American Standard that I'm reading, is a word, it's a noun which comes from a verb which means "going out." It's usually spoken of someone going out

from one place to another. But the noun form has the idea of border or the extreme limit, and the idea of the farthest place that you go out. It's used often in Numbers and Joshua to speak of the borders of Israel, this word. And so he's saying watch over your heart with all diligence for the very farthest reaches of your life and activity flow from your heart. He's saying that everything you do, even those small things way out on the extreme of your life, flow from your heart. So he's saying if you don't watch over your heart everything is going to be polluted, and if you do watch over your heart everything can have the aroma of grace and holiness about it.

This emphasis on the heart is so clear in the ministry of our Lord. I mentioned that the emphasis on the heart is so big in Scripture; a thousand times in the Bible it speaks of the heart. Jesus often speaks of this issue as he's dealing with Jews who were very good at focusing on the externals. The Pharisees, they were thought to be righteous people. We forget this when we look at Scripture. We read it through the lens of all of our time and all of the theology we've developed since the New Testament but when Jesus was encountering the Pharisees they were highly regarded by the Jewish people. They were the spiritual heroes. They weren't the enemies. They weren't the bad guys. They weren't wearing the black hats. They had on the white hats and Jesus was exposing that the white hats really were just the external, that when you really looked inside of their hearts, these are the bad guys because their heart, as he said, "They honor Me with their lips," but what? "Their hearts are far from Me." They're hypocrites. They feel something very different. They affect and act as if they love God but in reality they hate God. And it was evident in the fact that when God came directly in their presence they crucified him. They didn't welcome him.

But in Luke 6:45 Jesus says this, "The good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth what is good; and the evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth what is evil; for his mouth speaks from that which fills his heart." So what goes out of your mouth is what filled your heart. So the problem is not that you let it get out, that is a problem, it is good to bite your tongue, but that's only the very beginning of the problem, right? What you want to do is figure out what's going on down here that wants to come out here and Jesus says that's the issue.

And this is what God is all about, he wants to transform the heart. This is what it's talking about in Romans 12:2. So many verses that speak of this kind of issue. Romans 12:2, "do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." The mind is part of your heart. Renew your thinking. Renew your thoughts. Renew your beliefs. That's what God wants. That's what transforms your life is transforming your heart.

Turn back over to Mark 7:20. This is when Jesus has encountered the Pharisees. They're criticizing him because the disciples aren't washing their hands ceremonially before they eat, which was a Jewish tradition added to the Scriptures. It wasn't biblical. And he's basically telling them, "You're focused on the wrong things." He says that what you eat, the fact whether your hands are ceremoniously washed, cannot defile you in the presence of God. What you put into your mouth does not defile you. It's what comes out of your mouth, out of your life that defiles and makes you unfit for God. He says in verse 20, "He

was saying, 'That which proceeds out of the man, that is what defiles the man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man.'"

The reason you must attend to your heart is because this is where everything flows out of. You think about your physical health and your physical heart. It's an analogy here. Think about this, and I think this is why God chose this word, actually, one of the reasons is the heart physically. Think of the importance of your heart. If you have an unhealthy heart, what does that mean for your body? It means trouble, doesn't it? Because the heart is the organ that pumps blood to every cell of your body. And blood, the life is in the blood, the Scripture says. The blood takes oxygen to every cell. It takes nutrients to every cell. It takes things away from the cell that don't need to be there. So the heart is driving that whole process and so if the heart is not functioning properly, then everything else is affected by that. In the same way, spiritually, if we are not healthy in our thinking, and we're not becoming more healthy in our thinking, more healthy in our desires, more healthy in our choices, then spiritually we are languishing. And if you're not attending to the heart, you will not be healthy.

So, you know, as we get older, many of us start caring more about our heart. You may have one of those apps that you can just hold your phone and it tells you what your pulse is, your blood pressure, EKG even. Isn't that amazing? An EKG just by holding a phone? Think about all the different ways you look at your heart. The echocardiogram. You can do a catheterization where they put dye up in your heart. You can do a scan from the outside that shows if there are blockages. All of these things are important and what God is saying is if the physical heart is that important, have that kind of intense mindset about your spiritual heart. Watch it. Care for it.

So that's the exhortation, that's the explanation, finally, the application. What can we do with this? How do we watch over the heart? How do we care for the spiritual center of our lives? I want to suggest five things to do to apply this to our life for 2023 on a daily basis, and the first is to regularly observe your heart. Just make a point to regularly observe it and what I mean is be intentional about thinking about it. I think it's good to start off the morning at the beginning of the day and the end of the day thinking about your heart and asking the Lord to help you with your heart. You know, Psalm 139 says this, "Search me and know my heart; Try me and know my thoughts; And see if there be any wicked way in me, And lead me in the way everlasting."

So we need to be concerned about our hearts regularly, intentionally thinking about the heart. This means I think it would be good to do this in a sense of proactively, that is beginning and ending the day, but then also reactively during the day. When we sin, as we're cleaning up the mess and we're dealing with what we need to deal with, if we need to confess to someone, we confess it, but then, "Lord, what's going on in my heart? What's happening there?" Stop and look at it. And like I said, when we really see sin, we need to take time later to be more intentional about it.

So regularly observe, that's the first thing. Secondly, continually pray. I mentioned this a moment ago in that the psalmist is saying, "Lord, search me, know my heart." When you look at the Scriptures, they're often talking about the heart and they're often praying for help with the heart. David prays, "Created in me a clean heart, O God," Psalm 51. Psalm 86:1, he says, "Unite my heart to fear Your name." So we can't observe and correct our hearts in our own strength. It's impossible. It's a work of grace and so if it's a work of grace, prayer, we must bathe everything in prayer. So when we're observing it, we need to be doing it prayerfully, reverently. "Lord, help me look at this. I don't even know why I do the things that I do. Help me." But the understanding of it comes with that begins with that crying out to God.

So regularly observe. Secondly, continually pray. Intentionally search the Scriptures. When you see an area in your heart that's the concern, like I said, you lose your temper, you're struggling with lustful thoughts or you're struggling with anxiety, you're struggling with fearful thoughts, what do you want to do? Well, go to the word of God and search intentionally the Scriptures. What does the Bible have to say to this? How can the Bible change my thought processes, my beliefs? How can the Bible help me repent and change my desires? How can the Holy Spirit using the Scripture do that? Psalm 119:11 says, "Thy word have I hidden in my heart that I might not sin against You." The word itself transforms the heart.

That's what I was getting at a little while ago, Romans 12:2, don't be conformed, be transformed by the renewing of your mind. That's the Scripture renewing my thinking, changing my values and as you intentionally search the Scriptures, be ready for the Scriptures – this is important – be ready for the Scriptures to search you. Hebrews 4:12 says, "the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and pierces to dividing joint and marrow, soul and spirit, and is a discernor of the thoughts and intentions of the heart." That when you search the word of God, the wonderful thing about the word of God is, and you do it with an attitude of prayer, is the Scripture searches you. It unearths who you are, why you do the things that you do. It exposes unbelief. It exposes wrong values, wrong ideas.

So regularly observe, continually pray, intentionally search, and then earnestly mourn. One of the things we need to take time to do is to mourn over our sin. We need to be willing to, "Lord, as You show me this issue, this is coming from desires in me that are so ungodly. O Lord, help me. Have mercy on me. Help me hate this." And so we ask God to help us mourn, to help us see, "Help me see my heart the way You see my heart." And remember that as Jesus said, "Blessed are they who mourn, for they shall be comforted." The Comforter, the Holy Spirit comforts us when we mourn. There's nothing sweeter than to mourn over your sin and to understand that Christ has covered you in his righteousness and loves you and is going to change you. And even in the mourning, there's something happening. The heart is being transformed. But too often we pass over too quickly. We just want to worry about externals. We've got too many things to do, too many places to be. We must take time to deal with the heart.

So regularly observe, continually pray, intentionally search, earnestly mourn, and fifthly, willingly resolve. This is something that the Puritans are great at and Flavel talks about in

his book, is that it's helpful to be willing at times to make temporary vows or resolutions, to abstain from some activity so that I can cultivate a heart that loves the Lord more. This is what Spirit-led fasting can be. On this side of the cross, we don't fast to earn anything with God. Jesus has done everything necessary to make us right with God forever. But we're trying to cultivate our hearts and so fasting from food or other things at different times is a way to denial, self-denial for a period of time so that, "Lord, I'm doing this not to impress You. I don't want to try to impress You, Lord, because You know even my righteousness is filthy rags. I want You to look only at Christ when You look at me, but I want to cultivate a heart that loves You more. So use this time of fasting to do something in my heart to show me how I need to repent more deeply. Help me mourn."

It's something to do carefully, thoughtfully, sometimes in consultation with other brothers or sisters. Thinking about this issue, "I'd like You to hold me accountable. I don't want to do this particular thing, even though all things are all lawful for me, not all things are profitable," Paul says 1 Corinthians 6. And if you think about when you do this, think about it this way, the Lord has made us to be people who take dominion. That's what it means to be human. We take dominion over the earth. That's the creation mandate. Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and subdue it, Genesis 1. Think about how you like to subdue the earth. Some of you are very creative. You're artists. You like to do things and to work hard at, like we had today, our musicians work hard at a piece of music so that it comes beautifully across. Or maybe you like to paint or draw, or maybe you like to decorate. Think about how decorating a room and you take things out and you put new things in, and you get fabric, and you get colors to blend correctly, you put artwork and then you have a room and there it is and it's beautiful. Or maybe you like to do yard work and you like to pull the weeds, and you like to fertilize the grass, and you like to cultivate a beautiful yard and to plant the plants and to create the vision and from the front of your driveway, you look up toward the house and you see this beautiful layered frame of the front door and it's got the various colors going on seasonally and all of that. Maybe you're a builder. Maybe you're a woodworker. You like to craft and work wood. Think of it this way: what God wants you to do for him this year if you belong to Christ is beautify your heart. Make that your primary first project. Not because you can earn anything. No, you can earn nothing. You can add nothing to what Christ has done for your salvation. Be clear on that. Jesus has done everything, but because he has done everything, because you need give nothing to Christ for your salvation, out of love and gratitude cultivate a heart like his heart.

That's what he said about David. "I've chosen for Me a man after My own heart." I love that. That says God has, he wants us to understand our hearts. We're made in his image. We're made like him. He thinks. He desires. He chooses. He says, "I want My people to think like I think, to desire what I desire, and to choose what I choose." That's what thrills the heart of our Father when you and I become more like him by the power of his grace, always clinging to Christ, united to Jesus. And that's the key thing. What can change your desires? It is Jesus Christ living in you. It is clinging to him. So often I pray, "Lord. I don't feel what I should feel, Lord Jesus, but You always felt what You should feel. Give me Your love in this situation. Give me Your hatred for sin in this situation. Give me Your heart." And if we work on that this year, the more that we work on that the more pleased God is and the more impact we're going to have. This is what makes the salt to

have its savor. This is what makes the light of Christ in us to shine brightly in the midst of a dark world. If we do this and we do this well, God will be glorified, our Father will be delighted in our behavior, in the growth that he sees, and his name will be magnified in the hearts of people who need him desperately. Let's set our hearts to do this great work by his grace and for his glory.

Let's pray.

Father, we thank You for the wonder of all that Jesus is for us. We thank You that, Lord, that You truly have created us to reflect Your glory. We confess how our thoughts are not worthy of You so often, beliefs that we formed from the world around us that are just lies that we believe. Help us repudiate them and reject them and replace them with truth. The things that we desire that we ought not desire, Lord, we hate that, help us hate it more. And help us in seeing the beauty of Christ to desire what He desires and to desire what You would have us desire. And Lord, we choose the things we ought not choose far too often. Help us to resolve and to have hearts that are steadfast in pursuing holiness, choosing what You would have us choose. And may we help each other, may we encourage one another day after day as long as it's still called today so that none of us will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. And may Jesus Christ be praised for all that He does in His church in our lives this year. We pray in His name. Amen.