

Sermon 18, The Anatomy of Discipleship: How Well Are You Guarding Your Heart?, Proverbs 4:20-27

Proposition: Keep a careful watch on your heart, for it is central to a life of wisdom.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we come this morning to one of the most famous passages in the book of Proverbs. But though the central verse of this warning that the Father gives to His son rightly jumps out at us, we should not let the focus on the heart distract us from the rest of the body parts mentioned. The last section talked about the way of the righteous and the way of the wicked. This passage, though, presents the anatomy of discipleship. It talks about eyes and ears, feet and mouths. If we wanted to summarize it with a NT verse, we could say that it tells us to present our members as instruments of righteousness. Wisdom internalized must become wisdom externalized, and that can only happen when you guard your heart.

I. Getting Wisdom In, vv. 20-22

As we have already seen over and over, the passage begins with an exhortation to listen. What, didn't we get it the first five times? Of course, to ask that question is to answer it. The reason we come to church every Sunday is because we didn't get it the first five Sundays, or the first fifty Sundays. We need to hear the truth of God over and over. We need constant reminders because we forget and like to forget. It's hard to keep our minds fixed on the wisdom of God. It's hard to

do the work necessary to internalize wisdom. And so we need to be reminded, urged, exhorted over and over to be the people that we ought to be in all holiness and righteousness. Once again, therefore, the Father is going to give us a quick rundown of how to get wisdom and what wisdom promises. To this end, he focuses on the body parts that offer a way into the heart. Then, he talks about the heart in the central verse; and then he discusses what flows out of the heart in the last half of the passage. So let's talk about inputs, remembering that these words are addressed to us, the sons of God through faith in Jesus Christ. If you are already a child of God, you need to get wisdom in.

A. Where Wisdom Lives

So the Father explains that to gain wisdom, we need to use four internal capacities or organs that we have.

1. In the Attention, v. 20a

The first of these is attention. My son, He says, *pay attention*. Brothers and sisters, it is well known that attention is one of the most valuable commodities in the world today. The number of viewers, the number of listeners, the number of users is a key statistic that the world obsessively tracks. How many people watched this YouTube video? How many people listen to this radio personality? How many people drive by this billboard? How many people will watch this show? The world wants to know. Attention is money. Attention is how the big tech and media companies live. Without attention, they lose money and die. (See MySpace.)

We are used to living in a world that clamors for our attention. We are allegedly savvy navigators of this space, good at finding the content we like and ignoring the things we don't want to know about. We know how to silence our phones, mute notifications, and generally shut off the noise. But brothers and sisters, into the clamor cuts one authoritative voice, the voice of the Father. He demands attention.

Parents, you know this feeling. You've said it a million times. *Listen to me! Pay attention!* God wants your attention. Wisdom lives in paying attention to the right things, in listening to the right voice — the Father's voice.

Is that where your attention is directed? What do you spend more time listening to, the voice of your favorite entertainer, novelist, pundit — or the voice of the Father? Brothers and sisters, this is important. That's why Solomon goes over it and over it. Discipleship begins with attention. Wisdom begins with listening.

Listening to what, you ask? To the Father's wisdom. That's right. Wisdom begins with listening to wisdom. That's the message that Proverbs has presented to us repeatedly. The words of this book contain wisdom. That wisdom needs to come into us and be internalized wisdom. And as we grow in internalizing wisdom we gain in ability to know personified Wisdom.

Well, toward this goal of attention the father mentions three more body parts that we use to pay attention to His wisdom.

2. In the Ear, v. 20b

The first one is the ear. What do you listen to? Do you mostly listen to people praising God, to God's word, to sermons? Or do you mostly listen to cursing and swearing, to complaining, and to profaning the name of God? I understand that some of us can't control our work environments and that our Godless coworkers spew out that kind of filth all day long. But I'm talking about the listening environment that you control and that you influence. In your home, what do you hear? What do you hear from your own mouth? Is listening to the word of God a big part of your life? As I've said before, there are at least ten free recordings of the Bible available for listening at Bible Gateway. You can and should be getting Scripture in your ears. You can and should be listening to sermons, like you're doing right now. If you don't incline your ear, then you will never gain wisdom. Wisdom begins with listening!

3. In the Eyes, v. 21a

But wisdom also requires looking. The Father's sayings should be in front of your eyes. As we saw a few weeks ago, this is not only a command to read Scripture. It's a command to fix our eyes on personified wisdom, the Lord Jesus Christ. We need to be always looking at Him, always looking to Him. This is a truth that our Catholic friends have attempted to live out by hanging crucifixes all over their homes — often one above every doorway. While it is clear to us that Scripture does not allow for that particular practice, the point it's getting at is the exact point here. Set the Lord always before you! Always be looking to Jesus. Don't let Him out of your sight. Don't let your gaze wander onto other things. He needs to always be before your eyes.

Are you always looking at the news? At your bank account balance? At your stocks' performance? At your kitchen counters and the shelves of your refrigerator? Obviously, we need to know about those things to live. But the point here is that all of them need to be seen in relationship to Jesus Christ.

4. In the Heart's Interior, v. 21a

But not only does wisdom need to be getting your attention, coming in your ears and staying in front of your eyes. Wisdom needs to be in the midst of your heart.

And with that, this passage introduces its central theme. In the middle of the passage comes a reference to the heart. In the middle of the heart is where wisdom belongs. You need to keep wisdom in the core of the core of your being!

I don't know how many of you have ever been to Lake Superior. I, alas! have never had the privilege of witnessing it. But in Lake Superior lies Isle Royale, which is the largest island in Lake Superior.

[Siskiwit Lake](#) is the largest lake on the island. It has cold, clear water which is relatively low in nutrients. Siskiwit Lake contains several islands, including Ryan Island, the largest, which contains Moose Flats, a seasonal pond, which contains Moose Boulder. When Moose Flats is a pond, Moose Boulder becomes the largest island in the largest

lake on the largest island in the largest lake on the largest island in the largest lake in the world.³

Did you get that? I freely admit that I have been a little bit obsessed with Isle Royale and the possibility of standing on the largest island in the largest lake on the largest island in the largest lake on the largest island in the largest lake in the world. The sheer interiority of such a feat is breathtaking! But brothers and sisters, all of us have a heart in the interior of our being, right at the center of who we are. In the center of that heart is where wisdom ought to dwell.

Now, the New Testament tells us that Christ dwells in our hearts by faith. But He does not just dwell there as Savior, Sanctifier, and Son. He dwells there as the Wisdom of God, and His presence in our hearts demands that we behave wisely. Christians ought to be wisest people in the world, because we have access to Christ the power of God and Christ the wisdom of God. He should be in the midst of your heart according to His wise words in the book of Proverbs in the same way that Moose Boulder is in the midst of Lake Superior.

B. What Wisdom Promises, v. 23

And when Christ dwells in your heart like that, when you internalize personified wisdom, what will happen?

1. Life, v. 23a

The words of wisdom that you've incorporated into yourself will give you life. Again, we see the promise that wisdom leads to life. Ultimately, we know that we are mired in death and simply acting wisely won't save us. Only Jesus Christ can save. But He has saved us, and He is the wisdom of God! Our call as saved people is be conformed to His image, which means that He wants us to be wise as well. When we walk in wisdom, we will experience the blessing of life — life which is not just long in duration, but qualitatively good. Wisdom promises the good life! We know, of course, that folly will wreck our lives. But wisdom makes them good.

2. Health, v. 23b

Wisdom will also give you good health. It is a healing thing. Again, we know that letting go of bitterness and anger, trusting in God rather than stressing and worrying, has massively positive health benefits. But this goes beyond that reality. It is a promise from God Himself of healing, sometimes in this life but definitely in the life to come.

So why listen? Why pay attention? Because the reward is life, the good life, and health, good health.

Well, we move from the inputs and their rewards to a focus on the place where the inputs go. When you listen, when you look, when you pay attention to wisdom, where does it go? It goes into your heart.

II. Watching Your Heart, v. 23

And so Solomon tells us to put wisdom in our hearts and then to guard them. The KJV has “keep,” the same word often used for “keeping” God's law. But the Hebrew word doesn't simply

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isle_Royale

mean “put in the archives.” It means “watch, guard.” But this guarding is perhaps not as positive as we might think at first.

A. Guard it as you would a prisoner, v. 23a

You may well remember a famous passage in the Gospels in which the Lord Jesus warns His disciples about the sinful condition of their hearts. In an age when the religious leaders of Judaism effectively communicated that defilement and sin come from outside and mess people up, Jesus insisted on the exact opposite truth. It’s not the bad people around you who defile you. It’s not the bad things. It’s not the alcohol, drugs, mouthy neighborhood kids, and TV shows of the world that defile you. Instead,

“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.’” (Mar 7:20-23 NAS)

And brothers and sisters, that declaration of Jesus is essential for us to keep in mind as we examine the famous text of Proverbs before us. Keep your heart with all diligence, says King Solomon. Above all guarding, guard your heart! Now, we tend to hear that and think it means “Don’t let your heart get attached to things in the world out there.” When you’re talking to that cute girl, guard your heart. When you’re watching the yacht show, guard your heart.

Now, don’t get me wrong. That meaning is correct as far as it goes. We really are called to keep our hearts from getting overly attached to things. That’s what the tenth commandment means. But this passage is actually saying that the heart is the problem. The problem is not merely the heart *doing* something, the heart getting attached to something it can’t have, etc. The problem is the heart’s condition. The heart is being guarded, not in the sense of being protected from harm, but in the sense of preventing it from getting out and putting its evil inclinations into practice. Guard your heart from acting out its own wicked desires!

In short, when we are told to guard the heart, we are being warned not that the heart is vulnerable to a harsh world and is going to be hurt unless we takes steps to protect it. While that is true, God expects us to learn that from natural revelation, by observing this world. But special revelation tells us that our hearts are dangerous and need to be kept under careful watch.

Brothers and sisters, is this an easy command? Of course not. We are called to watch over ourselves. That’s who we are: we are dangerous. That’s not a pleasant thought, and one we would rather not face. It’s much easier to think that we are really good, and that it’s everyone else who’s bad. But Solomon tells us that our hearts are corrupt and that we have to watch them carefully to prevent them from breaking out in evil.

So how do you do this? How do you set a guard over your heart and keep it from wickedness? The answer is really something that the whole Bible talks about. You have to leverage the resurrection power of Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit to stop your heart from doing what’s wrong. And how do you do that? You listen to your father’s words of wisdom. You fix

your eyes on Jesus Christ, the wisdom of God. And you change your heart from the inside by filling it with God's word. That's what the passage just said!

So let's get this straight. To guard your heart means to walk with Jesus Christ, letting Him transform and renew you from the inside out by His word and Spirit. As you're walking, you must remember that your heart is a threat. Part of the reason you need to constantly remind yourself of your status and duties as a son is because at the very core of your being you've got this rebel heart that doesn't want to serve God.

B. It determines everything you do, v. 23b

But this kind of rebellion is the most dangerous kind. It's a rebellion from within, and not simply from within but in the very control center. Imagine Tsar Nicholas I joining the Bolsheviks. That's the kind of anti-law upheaval that I'm talking about. Your heart determines everything you do, as the NIV paraphrases the second half of v. 23. Literally, the Hebrew says that the wellsprings of life flow out of your heart. That is, the heart is the core of your being and the source of your life. Everything else — actions, thoughts, opinions, attitudes — is downstream. The heart is the headwaters of consciousness, the source of everything you do. The only thing prior to it in the order of being is the foundational word of God that created you from dust.

So why stop your heart from acting out? Because it controls you. You don't need to be told to "follow your heart." You already do. But at the same time, we are complex beings, and just as your heart controls you, so you control your heart. What this means is that you can only control your heart from your heart. If there's no part of your heart that wants to obey God, then you cannot guard your heart, for you are your heart.

So guard it. Don't let it do the evil that it so often wants to do. Stop yourself from doing evil at the core. That's what v. 23 means, and v. 27 only expands on it by telling you to stop yourself from doing evil in the actions that flow from the core.

III. Living Wisdom Out, vv. 24-27

How will you know that you're guarding your heart and preventing it from acting out the evil that lies latent within it? You'll know by looking at how you use the rest of your body.

A. Mouth: How you talk, v. 24

Again, this verse presents a strong parallel with the teaching of Jesus. He told us that it's from the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks. How you talk tells me a lot about your heart! What kind of words spill out of you? They are the words that were formulated by your heart. They show what's going on there. Lies come from a deceptive heart — a self-deceptive heart. Crooked, bitter, complaining speech comes from an unguarded heart, a heart that's allowed to do whatever it feels like doing! So as you're guarding your heart, your mouth will be the first place that will show a difference.

B. Eyes: Where you look, v. 25

Your eyes, too, show what's in your heart. Do you have roving eyes? Are you constantly casting them on your neighbors' stuff, wishing for their house, their car, their wife, their lawnmower, their budget, their well-behaved children? Are you constantly casting your eyes onto

entertainment, onto pornography, onto anything and everything this world has to offer? Or are you fixing them on Jesus, as v. 21 said to do? Brothers and sisters, an unguarded heart results in a roving eye that quickly spots an opportunity to sin and takes it. Eve *saw* the tree that it was good, and only then did she take.

So keep your eyes on the goal, the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Again, this will only happen if you listen to God's word and look to Jesus. This is not something you can do in your own strength, but only in His.

C. Feet: Where you go, vv. 26-27

Finally, think about where you're going. Check on the path of your feet, the direction of your life. Are you oriented toward pleasure? Toward wealth? Toward fun and enjoyment? Or toward the Kingdom of Heaven? All find what they truly seek. The path of your feet is certainly going somewhere, and as we saw last week, there are only two possible destinations for it. Do you want to head for destruction, or to travel on the way to life? Brothers and sisters, the choice is clear. You can't control your feet without God's help. But with God's help, your ways will be established. He will direct your paths, making your road through life go the way it should.

So go straight on toward Christ. Don't swerve toward some lesser goal, some created good. Fix your eyes on Jesus, the author and finisher of your faith. That's how you guard your heart — by giving it to Him. Amen.