

The Condition of Our Hearts

Proverbs 4:20-27

This past Monday marked the official beginning of “hurricane season” in the United States. They’ve already named this year’s hurricanes (in alphabetical order, of course): Ana, Bill, Claudette, Danny, Erika, etc. If you happen to have one of those names, get ready for the inevitable comparisons if one of those hurricanes hits land and does some damage.

One good thing about hurricanes is that you typically have several days warning to make preparations. The National Weather Service tracks hurricanes so that they can issue warnings and if necessary, order an evacuation. Most people, of course, take evacuation warnings very seriously. Especially in light of recent hurricanes, when an evacuation order is issued the highways are jammed with cars and trucks heading inland.

Some people, however, don’t believe in evacuating during a hurricane. There is even a tradition along the Gulf Coast of hosting “hurricane parties.” When a powerful hurricane (like Katrina 4 years ago) is bearing down on them, instead of evacuating and heading inland like everybody else, they stay put and throw a drinking party. They basically mock a dangerous situation by throwing a hurricane party. Most people who do this live to tell about it; sometimes the storm isn’t as severe as predicted or it veers off course a bit. But others actually die because they didn’t take the warnings seriously.

Most of Proverbs 1 through 9 is written from a father to his son. The father in Proverbs wants his son to avoid the equivalent of a hurricane party. He doesn’t want his son to go through life mocking danger and the clear warning signs all around him. He wants his son to be wise and to be protected. Interestingly, although the father has a lot to say about avoiding external dangers (people and circumstances), he is *most* concerned that his son guard himself *internally*. Today we are going to see from Proverbs 4 that this father wants his son to pay attention to the warning signs in his own heart. The condition of his heart was the key to a good life.

My goal this morning is the same as the father’s in Proverbs 4. I want us to leave here with a commitment to paying attention to the condition of our hearts. We need to avoid the equivalent of a hurricane party in our lives. We should pay close attention to the troublesome things in our hearts – heeding the warning signs we see in relationships and in circumstances. We should also pay close attention to the good and healthy things we see in our hearts because that’s evidence of God’s work.

If you are a follower of Christ, the great thing to remember is that when the Pharisees confronted Him about eating with tax-gatherers and sinners, Jesus described himself as a “physician.” People who know that they are sick will find that Jesus brings healing in the deepest parts of their souls. Those who don’t think they are sick won’t be too impressed with Jesus. And so if we see dangerous things in our lives, we can come to Jesus for healing. That’s what Jesus does – fix the human heart that is weighed down with fear and anxiety, the heart that is paralyzed by sin, or the heart that is divided. The lament in the book of Jeremiah was that the religious leaders healed “superficially” (6:14, 8:11). Jesus came to heal the deepest parts of our souls/hearts.

With this in mind, please turn with me to Proverbs 4:20-27. The first thing the father explains is:

The strategic importance of paying attention to the condition of our hearts (4:20-23) If you've been here for other messages from Proverbs, these words will sound familiar. The emphasis is upon fixing the members of our bodies on wisdom – the eyes, ears, heart, etc.

20 My son, give attention to my words;
Incline your ear to my sayings.
21 Do not let them depart from your sight;
Keep them in the midst of your heart.
22 For they are life to those who find them
And health to all their body.

We've already spent quite a bit of time in Proverbs talking about the importance of seeking wisdom like hidden treasure. The main thing I want us to notice from these verses is that we are to "keep [wisdom] in the midst of ***our hearts***" (v. 21). The heart is the core of a person's being. The heart is the "command and control" center of a person. We think with our heart (the term for heart is sometimes translated "mind"); we feel with our hearts; we make decisions with our hearts. And so a heart that is fully integrated and centered on God will think properly (in a way that is consistent with reality), will have (to a certain extent) the right feelings (those that mirror God's feelings), and will make good decisions (those that lead to life and further the purposes of God).

That being the case, the father wants the son to keep his commands (wisdom really) "in the midst of [his] heart." He wants wisdom to be right there guiding his son in the core of his being. This is the consistent plea of Scripture – to put God's truth at the center of our being. In Deuteronomy 6 Moses told the children of Israel, "These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be ***on your heart***" (Deut. 6:6). Paul wrote to the Colossians, "Let the word of Christ ***richly dwell within you***" (Colossians 3:16). So often Christians have a high view of Scripture but a low experience of Scripture. That was never meant to be the case. We are continually told to keep God's truth at the core of our being.

The reason is given in verse 22. The father tells his son that his teachings "are life to those who find them, and health to all their body." This is what Brian talked about last week. Through the wisdom of Scripture we understand and experience ***life*** as God meant for it to be lived.

In verse 23 the father tells the son why this attention to his heart is so strategic:

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

Some translations read, "Guard your heart." The idea is to give extraordinary attention to the condition of your own heart. The opposite is to be oblivious to what is entering into your heart and dwelling there. In Proverbs, a foolish person isn't really concerned if there is anger, lust, jealousy, greed, deception, etc. in his/her heart; a fool doesn't understand the importance of the heart.

A wise person, by contrast, diligently pays attention to the condition of his/her heart. This isn't self-centeredness or morbid introspection. This is an attentiveness that comes from the understanding that everything in a person's life flows from the heart. We live from our hearts.

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

The heart is pictured as a fountain/spring. Think about a little village in the mountains whose only source of water is a spring coming up from the ground. That spring provides fresh water for drinking, cooking, bathing, crops, etc. That village would be foolish not to pay attention to the condition of that spring because it is a source of life. If the spring becomes polluted, everyone and everything in the village would suffer.

In the same way, we would be foolish not to pay attention to the condition of our hearts because our hearts affect everything in our lives. Whatever fills our hearts flows out into the rest of our lives. The human heart is the source of everything we do. Whether for good or evil, we live out of the heart. The condition of your heart determines:

- the health of your relationships with others
- the depth of your relationship with God
- your experience in the body of Christ
- your contentment and satisfaction with your work
- even your ability to get a good night's sleep (not the only factor, but certainly important)

From our hearts flow “the springs of life”; we live out of our hearts. The term translated “heart” in verse 23 is found 98 times in the book of Proverbs! It’s obviously a key to pursuing wisdom.

If I asked you, “What is the condition of your heart?” would you be able to give an answer? For some of us, paying attention to the condition of our hearts is the most strategic thing we can do at this point in our lives. Consciously paying attention to the condition of your heart might be the thing that humbles you before God and makes you consistently teachable before Him.

The next question is, “How would a person even know the condition of his/her heart?” Sometimes people think that the human heart is inscrutable – that we can never really know our own hearts or anybody else’s. It is true that only God knows the human heart *exhaustively*. But it is not true that the human heart is beyond our scrutiny. As a matter of fact, there are some very tangible, observable indicators of what is happening in our hearts. It turns out that the condition of our hearts is on display in the things we think, say, and do.

Look with me at verses 24 through 27.

Tangible indicators of the condition of our hearts (4:24-27) After the father challenges his son to treasure up wisdom in his heart and to watch over his heart with all diligence, he gives a series of instructions about his mouth, eyes, and feet. Centuries later Paul would refer to these as “the members of our bodies” that can be either instruments of righteousness or unrighteousness. These commands concerning our mouths, eyes, and feet can be obeyed only when we are watching over our hearts with all diligence. Otherwise, we’ll have a type of external obedience only (such as that of the Pharisees in the days of Jesus).

Mouth (v. 24) One of the best ways to observe what is happening in a person’s heart is to listen to his/her words.

24 Put away from you a deceitful mouth
And put devious speech far from you.

Proverbs paints a fascinating picture of a person who is wise in speech. Such a person often refrains from speaking (see 10:19); but when a wise person does speak, his/her words are gracious, direct, and truthful. Other people never have to wonder whether they're being deceived or misled.

Throughout Proverbs we are told that the mouth expresses what is in the heart (Proverbs 16:23 says, "The heart of the wise teaches his mouth. . ."). Or consider what Jesus said in Matthew 12:

33 "Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad; for the tree is known by its fruit. 34 "You brood of vipers, how can you, being evil, speak what is good? For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart. 35 "The good man brings out of *his* good treasure what is good; and the evil man brings out of *his* evil treasure what is evil.

This is more confirmation that "from our hearts flow the springs of life." Even though we often wish it weren't so, it is true that our words are a reliable indicator of what is in our hearts.

Eyes (v. 25)

25 Let your eyes look directly ahead
And let your gaze be fixed straight in front of you.

The person who "looks directly ahead" is following after Wisdom singlemindedly. He isn't looking to the right or the left to check out other options. The wise person isn't distracted by temptation to leave "the path of life." The foolish person is always looking around for different objects of desire.

We can apply this principle both literally and figuratively. On a literal level, we need to pay attention to the things to which our eyes are drawn. Jesus, for example, said that a man who "looks at a woman" lustfully has already "committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matthew 5:28). On a literal level, where our eyes look can tell us a lot about the condition of our hearts.

On a figurative level, we can apply this verse in the sense of noticing whether we're singlemindedly pursuing wisdom or whether we're always looking around for other ways of living our lives. Sometimes our flesh is trained to crave after sinful, destructive things. Noticing our habits of the flesh is critical.

Feet (vv. 26-27)

26 Watch the path of your feet
And all your ways will be established.
27 Do not turn to the right nor to the left;
Turn your foot from evil.

Here the warning is not to allow our feet to take us down the wrong path. Proverbs speaks of the foolish having “feet that run to do evil” (1:16, 6:18). By contrast, the wise stay on the path of life, the path of righteousness. Proverbs 15:21 says that “a man of understanding walks straight.” By contrast, the foolish man follows paths that are “crooked” (2:15). Having feet that stay on the path of righteousness is to be singleminded in pursuit of wisdom.

The picture being painted here is that of a person whose heart and body are fully God’s. This is a picture of “shalom” – of wholeness and health. In Paul’s terminology, this person is alive to God and therefore presents the members of his/her body to God as instruments of righteousness (Romans 6:13). It all starts with the heart. But if you want to monitor the condition of your heart, notice what you think, say, and do. Those are the tangible indicators of the condition of our hearts.

Let me give you an example from my life. Last weekend I was working on a little house project (rain barrels!). I went into a store for some supplies. I needed some help figuring out what I needed to buy, so I tracked down somebody to help me. The guy I located started out quite helpful, but he soon wandered off to help somebody else. I still couldn’t figure out what I needed so I tracked down this guy again and asked him another question. He answered my question in that tone of voice that made clear that I’m just not as bright as I should be. And then he walked off.

This guy actually made me mad. At that point I wasn’t thinking, “Be kind for everyone you meet is fighting a great battle,” or even “This guy must be having a bad day.” I was thinking, “That guy’s a jerk. . .” I didn’t say it, but that’s what I was thinking. Thoughts often do become words. But guess where that thought came from? That’s right: my heart. People who think angry thoughts and who say angry words have anger in their hearts. If I really want to “watch over my heart with all diligence” I need to notice things like that. You may be thinking, “But the guy *was* a jerk.” Maybe, but I’m not as concerned about the condition of *his* heart as the condition of *my* heart.

If you want to “guard your heart with all diligence,” pay close attention to the thoughts that dominate your mind and the words that come out of your mouth. Alarms should go off if you find that you often criticize other people or if you find yourself talking too much or if you find yourself saying unkind things to people. Of course if you notice that you tend to say gracious words that meet the need of the moment, you should be encouraged because that indicates that you have true compassion in your heart. If you notice that you are able to refrain from saying things you know you shouldn’t, be encouraged because that’s evidence of self-control.

In closing, I’d like to draw your attention to a very wise prayer at the end of Psalm 139. ***A prayer inviting God to expose the condition of our hearts. (Psalm 139)*** David understood the strategic importance of understanding the condition of his heart. At the end of this psalm which describes how comprehensive and how generous God’s thoughts toward us really are, David prayed:

23 Search me, O God, and know my heart;
Try me and know my anxious thoughts;
24 And see if there be any hurtful way in me,
And lead me in the everlasting way.

David knew that he could be deceived about the condition of his hearts. He understood that he could have blind spots when it came to his heart. And so he prayed that God would scrutinize his heart and show him if there was anything there that was hurtful. If we would “watch over our hearts with all diligence,” we surely need to pray this same thing.

So often we hide from God. We organize our days so that we are never alone and quiet before God. We fill our lives with noise many times, I think, to drown out the quiet voice of God. But as followers of Christ, there’s no need to do that. Jesus is the “great physician”; those who honestly, humbly admit that their hearts are sick will find healing in Jesus.

Let’s take a few moments now to quiet our hearts before God. We’ll leave the words of Psalm 139 on the screen so that you can make this prayer your prayer. I would remind you that if you want someone to pray with you today, come forward after the benediction.

Additional Note on 2 Chronicles 16:9

9 "For the eyes of the LORD move to and fro throughout the earth that He may strongly support those whose heart is completely His.

The eyes of God move throughout the earth looking for a specific type of person. God is not looking for the smartest, most talented, most influential people in the world. He is looking for “those whose heart is completely His.” God looks to the core of our being to see whether our fundamental orientation is toward Him or toward someone or something else.