

Guard your Heart
Proverbs 4:21-27,

Brothers and sisters in Christ, this morning we continue our September sermon series - The Heart of the Matter - or as I was originally going to call it A Matter of the Heart.

Now when we talk about “the heart of the matter” we intend to identify the basic, central and most critical point of an issue, and when it comes to our being disciples of Jesus Christ “the heart of the matter...” is that it is “a matter of our hearts.”

And while I don’t think anyone would really disagree with that statement – what we understand “the matter of the heart” to mean can take on a wide variety of definitions.

There are those who would say that “a matter of the heart” describes how all the head knowledge they had about Jesus and the information about Christian faith suddenly came alive and was exciting and meaningful for them, and they experienced feelings of love and enthusiasm for God as their faith went “*from their head to their heart*” as they would say.

And so for these people our Hearts are primarily about feelings and emotions.

Then there are those who would say that “a matter of the heart” describes the level of commitment and sincerity that you demonstrate in your Christian walk. When they see Christians going the extra mile and sacrificing their time and money to serve the less fortunate in our society, they would say that “*their hearts are truly in it.*”

For these people the Heart is primarily about the dedication that produces authentic expressions of the faith.

But however these two groups might disagree on what defines matters of the heart, they would both agree that instruction and teaching are not really at the heart of the matter.

In fact they would say that too much emphasis on knowledge and facts is part of the problem, because you can know all about God but not really love Him and you can know all about the right way to live out your faith but not really do it.

Now brothers and sisters, there is always the risk of hypocrisy for those who follow Jesus Christ, but the risk does not justify reductionistic definitions of the human heart.

If we look at the Bible's understanding of the human heart – and how we ought train ourselves to think about our hearts – we will discover that it is summative...

The heart is the seat of our mind, our emotions, our will, our beliefs our convictions – and as we learned last week – our desires. So when the Bible speaks about the heart, it is referring to the sum total of all that makes us who we are before God and that which drives our lives.

Therefore it makes sense that Proverbs 4:23 instructs us to *“guard our hearts for everything we do flows from it”* or as the older versions of the NIV used to translate it *“guard your heart for it is a wellspring of life.”*

Now if we didn't understand the Bible's definition of the Heart and we used our own understanding we might speculate that

this verse is instructing us to keep our emotions and feelings pure, or that we should take precautions to protect that which makes us authentic and *“always keep it real.”*

Or perhaps you have heard this verse quoted when someone was admonishing you to avoid watching certain movies and not listen to particular kinds of music or read certain types of books which depicted immorality and sinfulness.

And so we've understood the task of guarding our hearts to mean keeping sinful influences out of our lives so that they don't lead us into immorally.

Now – there is a great deal of wisdom in being discerning about what we ought to watch and listen to and enjoy for entertainment's sake because of how it can affect us - but that is not what this verse is talking about.

Instead to guard our hearts as a wellspring of life is to protect our heart and guard it as one would guard a very valuable and

precious treasure – after all did not Jesus say that “*where your treasure is there your heart will be also?*” (Luke 12:34)

So think about what it is that you protect... what is so valuable and precious to you that you guard it and keep it safe?

And in the context of what Proverbs 4:23 says, what we work at protecting we most likely consider to be a wellspring of life – something we deem essential to survive and thrive!

So we protect our houses and our cars and their contents with security systems and locks and we insure them so that if anything happened to them we are able to replace them.

We are careful about what we do with our money and where we invest it so that we protect our earnings and we have money to live off of when we are no longer able to work.

And we quite literally guard our hearts – the organ in our chest - as we follow the advice of the health professionals to exercise regularly and eat right.

And we have refrigerators and freezers to prevent our food from spoiling and our city treats the water supply so that we will have safe drinking water.

We even insure our lives – so that if we will leave something behind to provide for our families and pay off our debts.

These are all examples of how we protect that which we need in order to live – and Jesus acknowledges in Luke 12:29 that it is easy to set our hearts on what we will eat and drink. But even though we need these to live – protecting them is not what Proverbs 4:23 is talking about.

To understand the context and make sense of guarding our hearts as the wellspring of life we must remember how Jesus said “*It is written: ‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’*” (Matt 4:4)

And what does God want His people to do with the words that He speaks to them, Well God says in Deuteronomy 8:11 “*Fix these words of mine in your hearts!”*

And so at the end of Deuteronomy in chapter 32:46-47 Moses reminds Israel *“Take to heart all the words I have solemnly declared to you this day, so that you may command your children to obey carefully all the words of this law. They are not just idle words for you, they are your life.”*

And the prophet Jeremiah goes so far as to say this *“When your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart’s delight...”* (Jer 15:16)

So Jeremiah uses this very descriptive metaphor to describe how he has internalized and taken into his heart the words God has spoken to him.

So brothers and sisters this is larger biblical context that is reflected in the passage we read from Proverbs. Let me just read it again for you so you can catch the similarities.

vs 21 starts *“My son, pay attention to what I say; turn your ear to my words. Do not let them out of your sight, keep them*

within your heart; for they are life to those who find them and health to one’s whole body.”

Are you noticing the how all that we’ve just identified from what Jesus said, and what Moses said and what Jerimiah has said about God’s words, about teaching, about taking them into the heart, and about how they are Life is reflected in Proverbs 4:21-22?

This is why we are to guard our hearts as the wellspring of life.

It’s not because our hearts are the core of who we are and we must protect our identity because it so unique... it is because our hearts are the depository for the very words of God.

We’ve just heard four examples from the scriptures of how people, especially God’s people and young people are called to receive God’s words and put them in their hearts...

So if anyone has been obedient and done this, then Proverbs 4:23 comes along to say that you must protect your heart and

keep it safe because you have been given such a treasure in the words of God you can't let them get away from you, you can't let anything happen to them, God's words are your life.

So brothers and sisters - do we really believe the words of God are life for us? I mean there's no question that we consider them important.

There is lots of good inspiration that we can get from them which makes us feel good, feel encouraged... there is lots of good examples in them that we can follow so that we are authentically helping others and loving our neighbors... But do we really believe God's words in our hearts - are life?

Maybe we need to imagine that we are all kind of like Tony Stark – Iron Man from the Avengers movies – who has little tiny pieces of metal shrapnel embedded in his chest that working towards his heart and when they reach it he will die...

Tony is kept alive by an electromagnet set into his chest which pulls those pieces of metal away from his heart and this

electromagnet has an amazing self-sustaining energy source that powers it.

For Tony Stark this arc-reactor and its power is his life – if he loses it, in a very short time he will die. Friends – we need God's words in our heart in the same way. They are Life.

So how we get them in there? It's easy for Tony Stark to put the arc-reactor that keeps him alive into a metal cylinder that is embedded into his chest... it's a little less obvious as to how we take God's words and put them into our hearts.

But the first thing we need to do is accept and believe that God's words, given to us as the scriptures, are actually life.

And then we need to read the scriptures – and not just a verse or two of scripture... but many verses, whole chapters – complete books of the bible – and read them regularly.

And read them like you would read any other book! Now I know that might sound strange and come across like we're

not really treasuring them as we should, but brothers and sister just because they are God's words doesn't mean they aren't words.

The only way to really understand what the bible says on a deeper level is to first understand what it says on a surface level, and that means just reading it like you would read a novel or an article or a text book without trying to have mystical insights. *(Give adult bible study example and why Biblical Equipping is so important)*

Next we need to "submit" ourselves to the teaching ministry and instruction of our church.

When a minister is opening up God's words and teaching and instructing from them in a message or sermon or in a bible study class, we need to take the posture of a willing student ready to receive what God wants to say to us.

A sermon is not just an interesting exploration of some scripture passages with some helpful advice to make your life

easier, it's not something you just listen to and thoughtfully consider it and then go on your way... as scripture says "*Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.*" James 1:22

In the sermon God's words come to us and take up residence in our hearts – but that requires our cooperation and we need to come prepared and ready to receive and take those words home with us and meditate on them... think about all the different ways in which it might apply and work out in your life... allow it to correct and change how you think and believe – and work to bring yourself in line with God's words.

And there's another thing we can do to put God's words in our hearts – we can memorize them. Now I'm not sure what the latest educational theories say about the pro's and con's of memorization, but when it comes to scripture I don't believe it applies in quite the same way because we're not memorizing just any old material - we're memorizing God's words!

Since their source of the memorized material is from God, it has an inherent divine power – not a magical superstitious power that zaps things – but the power to bring forth what God desires when God desires it.

Again scripture says *“my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.”* (Isaiah 55:11)

You never know when the scripture that you have memorized is going suddenly pop into your mind as a way that God may guide you, direct you, warn you, encourage you or equip you to speak when you don’t know what to say.

And the last thing we can do to put God’s word in our hearts is to teach it to our children, because to teach is to learn a second time, and scripture commands us to *“Teach them to your children and to their children after them.”* (Deut 4:9)

So to teach something you need to really know something – so teaching children and youth God’s words can be an excellent way to put more of His words into your heart as well as theirs. And that brothers and sisters, is how we get God’s words into our hearts; then we need to learn how we guard them – and this starts with recognizing how valuable God’s words are.

To Guard our hearts is to protect the value of God’s words and the first way to do that is by showing how much you personally value them. *(Side note: Do we value them enough to pass them on to our children? What are you doing to put God’s words into their hearts and guarding their hearts?)*

The rest of our scripture reading from Proverbs 4 describes how this can work out practically in our daily life; it says *“Keep your mouth free of perversity; keep corrupt talk far from your lips.”* (vs. 24)

So it starts with something very specific – with how we talk and I know that our first instinct is to say that this means no

swearing or dirty jokes – but remember we’re talking about how we keep the value of God’s words.

So while we are not condoning swearing and dirty jokes what this is instructing us to do is to speak the scriptures correctly. Don’t perversely twist them to justify sinful behavior, do not water down the message of the scripture and corrupt it.

This is why in 2 Timothy 2:15 Paul encourages Timothy to be someone *“who correctly handles the word of truth.”*

So that’s why I’m pointing to you that Proverbs 4:24 isn’t really speaking about dirty jokes – and you... you must speak correctly then - instead of saying *“oh so then the bible doesn’t say anything about swearing and dirty jokes it must be ok.”*

In this way we keep our mouth free from perversity and our lips far from corruption – and we protect and value scripture!

Then Proverbs 4:25 says *“Let your eyes look straight ahead; fix your gaze directly before you.”* Now I know that this seems

to be a great verse about not looking off to the side lustfully at pornography or another man or woman – but it’s not.

It’s about protecting the value of God’s words by not looking to anything else for life or as a basis for our faith – as Presbyterians are famous for saying *“scripture is the only rule for faith and life!”*

Only scripture provides the specific revelation that we need in order to correctly know who God is and that we have a Covenant relationship with Him that we are incapable of keeping faithfully as sinful humans.

Only through scripture can we come to know what it means that we are sinners in need of a savior – and be introduced to Him and lead to put our faith in Him. Only in scripture do we find the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Again, as Paul notes to Timothy how *“from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.”* (2 Tim 3:15)

So we protect the value of God's words by keeping our focus on scripture and not looking to anything else for saving revelation – no other religious books... nor psychology or science or education or any source of knowledge.

Now – let us make sure that in keeping our eyes straight ahead we do not speak perversely of scripture.

While scripture is the only rule for faith and life, the scripture is not a science or economics textbook.

We corrupt the scripture and turn it from its true purpose and fail to protect God's words and guard our hearts when attempt to use the scripture to say- prescribe our economics.

But Proverbs 4:26 has already anticipated this error and we protect the value of God's words when we *“Make level paths for our feet and be [are] steadfast in all our ways.”*

To make level paths and be steadfast is not speaking about living morally upright lives by avoiding moral traps and pitfalls – as good as that is for us.

This is about protecting the value of God's words in scripture and how they function as Ps 119:105 says as *“a lamp for our feet and a light upon our paths.”*

While the scriptures primary value to us is that it makes us wise for salvation in Jesus Christ, its further value to us is that it functions like a lamp – and when we shine its unique divine light upon the Creation God's words in scripture reveal God's Word in His Creation.

In other words scripture not only makes us wise for salvation by revealing the Word made Flesh - but it makes us wise to live by the Word of Creation and this is how we make smooth and level paths for ourselves.

If you can see, and understand how something works – then can work with it instead of fighting against it – you level it out.

It can be as simple as literally going with the grain instead of against the grain, when you work with a piece of wood... or it can be as complex as skillfully navigating the changing dynamics of relationships so you are successful in them and they benefit you and bring you health.

Brothers and sisters living by the Word in Creation is wisdom... and God's words help us to become skillful in life and then we can be steadfast – dependable, consistent and reliable – because God's Word in creation is steadfast.

So when we live by wisdom we protect the value of God's words – we guard our hearts and our wellspring of life – and life will be good for us. And this good life now is a sign and foretaste that there is an even better life to come.

If we are wise enough to recognize and try to live by the Word in Creation – then we will be prepared for how God's words show us the wisdom in putting our faith and trust in that same Word made flesh – Jesus Christ.

Brothers and sisters let us put the word of God in our hearts and into the hearts of our children – and let us guard them!

So I offer this final passage of God's word from Paul to Timothy to put into our hearts this morning *“devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching. Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through prophecy when the body of elders laid their hands on you. Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress. Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.”*

Amen.