

A Heart for Wisdom

Proverbs 4:10-27

¹⁰ Hear, my son, and accept my words, that the years of your life may be many. ¹¹ I have taught you the way of wisdom; I have led you in the paths of uprightness. ¹² When you walk, your step will not be hampered, and if you run, you will not stumble. ¹³ Keep hold of instruction; do not let go; guard her, for she is your life. ¹⁴ Do not enter the path of the wicked, and do not walk in the way of the evil. ¹⁵ Avoid it; do not go on it; turn away from it and pass on. ¹⁶ For they cannot sleep unless they have done wrong; they are robbed of sleep unless they have made someone stumble. ¹⁷ For they eat the bread of wickedness and drink the wine of violence. ¹⁸ But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, which shines brighter and brighter until full day. ¹⁹ The way of the wicked is like deep darkness; they do not know over what they stumble.

Here we have the inspired father's fifth lecture or admonition to his son, and in it he rehearses some themes that are now familiar to us.

- There is the contrast between the way of wisdom and righteousness on the one hand and the way of folly and sin on the other.
- There is the link – even a near parallel – between wisdom and righteousness, and between foolishness and sin.
- There is the motivational clause expressing the value, the pay-off of wisdom, the reminder that righteousness truly is wise.
- There is the warning about the foolishness of sin.
- There is the concern not just to conform to the teaching but to value it. Verse 13: “Keep hold of instruction; do not let go; guard her, for she is your life.”

So it may sound like I'm repeating myself in these studies. I don't feel embarrassed by that because that's what the inspired sage is doing. In fact, it would be a very naïve father who assumed that teaching his son something *once* would be sufficient. It takes some years to grow up, and learning requires repetition. And these admonitions (Prov. 1-9) in several ways are very repetitive, especially with regard to this connection between wisdom and righteousness. Over and over again he reminds his son that it is wise to be righteous and foolish to pursue sin. It seems he can't make that link often enough. And in fact it's just the connection we're apt to forget – there is what we call “remaining sin.” “Foolishness is bound in the heart of a child,” and even after we grow up, even after coming to Christ and experiencing the cleansing and renewal he gives, and all the way until we go to be with Christ, sin remains – and it confuses us. When tempted to sin we foolishly think it will pay off. We need this reminder every day that it is wise to be righteous and foolish to pursue sin. And so to guard his son against forgetting, in each of these lectures the inspired sage reminds him again and again.

This wise father also reminds his son repeatedly to “keep” the instruction he gives him (v.13) – to guard and protect it, to recognize its value and treasure it accordingly, to recognize its value and adopt it as his own. He's trying desperately not just to steer his son's behavior but to reach his heart – to make him see that the instruction God gives us for life is immeasurably good for us. It pays off. It results in a life without regret, a life that is blessed. As he says in verse 12, “When you walk, your step will not be hampered, and if you run, you will not stumble.”

And so, in verse 13 he exhorts him again, “Keep hold of instruction; do not let go; guard her, for she is your life.”

Isn't it ironic that although everyone wants to get the most out of life, we so easily ignore the one prescription that never fails to give it. God has told us how to live so as to know his favor, and we have to be told again and again and again. And then we forget anyway. Surely that says something about the human heart.

The remainder of this admonition (vv. 14-19) consists of another exhortation to the life of wisdom, only now it is the wisdom of shunning sin (vv. 14-15) and an attending explanation / motivation (vv.16-19).

Verses 14-15 give us the exhortation: “Do not enter the path of the wicked, and do not walk in the way of the evil. Avoid it; do not go on it; turn away from it and pass on.”

Why? Verses 16-19 explain at length:

¹⁶ For they cannot sleep unless they have done wrong; they are robbed of sleep unless they have made someone stumble. ¹⁷ For they eat the bread of wickedness and drink the wine of violence. ¹⁸ But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, which shines brighter and brighter until full day. ¹⁹ The way of the wicked is like deep darkness; they do not know over what they stumble.

All this to say, Avoid sin at all costs. It's foolish. It does not pay off. It does not deliver what it promises. You'd only be a fool to pursue it.

Because of the family setting here I keep coming back to application for you parents. This is a model you should follow. Don't just tell your kids not to do this and that – *teach them the folly of sin*. Take the time to try to reach their hearts, and press upon them the reality that they live under God. They must know that whether they acknowledge it or not there is a moral order to this world put there by God himself. They must know that to violate that order will not work out well for them. For their own sakes they must prize the direction for life that God gives. “Don't be a fool. Be wise and live unto God.”

So in this fifth admonition (vv. 10-19) the inspired sage again admonishes his son to prize wisdom for his own good and to avoid sin at all costs.

Now in his next lecture (vv. 20-27) he exhorts his son yet again to listen well to divine wisdom. And again the theme is that of wise living, only this time he has some very specific points of reference.

First, we have again his call to capture his son's attention (vv. 20-21):

²⁰ My son, be attentive to my words; incline your ear to my sayings. ²¹ Let them not escape from your sight; keep them within your heart.

Again he presses his son both to listen up (v.20) and to remember (v.21). And again he is trying as far as he is able to reach his son's heart so that he will value this instruction rightly and adopt it as his own. "Keep them within your heart."

And then again we have the motivational clause (v.22): "For they are life to those who find them, and healing to all their flesh." Speaking in metaphor again he presents wisdom as the medicine needed for life and health. "Listen up, son, you *want* this instruction! It will keep you from getting sick (as it were). It will make life blessed."

Now notice his specific points of application in verses 23-27:

²³ Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life. ²⁴ Put away from you crooked speech, and put devious talk far from you. ²⁵ Let your eyes look directly forward, and your gaze be straight before you. ²⁶ Ponder the path of your feet; then all your ways will be sure. ²⁷ Do not swerve to the right or to the left; turn your foot away from evil.

Notice that his instruction this time is directed to specific body parts and functions: the heart (v.23), the mouth (v.24), the eyes (v.25), and the feet (v.26-27). The heart – what we *are*. The mouth – what we *say*. The eyes – what we *look at*. And the feet – *where we go*. Clearly this father is trying to stress that the wisdom of God is designed to shape all of life – who we are, what we say, what we look at, and where we go.

Some of you may remember, as I do, learning the little children's song in Sunday School:

*O be careful little feet where you go!
O be careful little feet where you go!
For the Father up above is looking down in love,
O be careful little feet where you go!*

Then there were other stanzas:

*O be careful little hands what you do!
O be careful little tongue what you say!
O be careful little eyes what you see!
O be careful little ears what you hear!*

That counsel is very important, and it reflects these verses here in Proverbs 4.

But we should be careful to note the importance he places on the heart (v.23).

ESV: "Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life."

KJV: "Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life."

NIV: "Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it."

"Keep" has the idea not just of preserving but *guarding, protecting*. "Guard, protect your heart with all diligence." The NIV translation stresses the sense, obviously in view, that nothing is more important than this – "Above all else, guard your heart."

The "heart" in Scripture, as often in our own usage, does not refer to the organ that pumps blood. Sometimes it refers to the affections, as it often does in English, but the ancient world usually had other expressions for that. The "heart" in Scripture consistently refers to the inner self and all that it comprises – your psyche, your mind, your affections, your will. The heart is that inner

person that makes you *you* – with all your desires and ambitions and appetites and thoughts and plans. The heart in Proverbs is the seat of wisdom (Prov. 2:10), the seat of trust or confidence (3:5), the source of plans and schemes (6:18), the seat of lust (6:25), understanding (8:5), rebellion (11:20), and intellectual pursuits (16:9). Again, the “heart” is the inner self that makes you *you*. That’s what Proverbs 27:19 says – “As in water face reflects face, so the heart of man reflects the man.” Your heart is who and what you are. It’s our “center,” the seat of personality.

And it’s our heart that the inspired sage says we must “guard with all vigilance, above all else.” Above every other responsibility – before your responsibility to make money, earn a living, take care of your health – before anything else! – guard your heart. Protect *who you are* inwardly.

Why? Because “from it flow the springs of life.” Everything about you springs from who you are on the inside. Who and what you are inwardly – in your mind, your affections, your will, and your desires – determines everything about you, all the choices you make and all that you do.

That’s why in David’s repentance he says that what God desires is “truth in the inward being” and “wisdom in the secret heart” (Ps. 51:6). And that’s why a genuine repentance acknowledges the need not just for forgiveness but a “clean heart” (Ps. 51:10). We sin because of a bad heart. It’s our own desires that led us astray (Jms. 1:14). And this is why the saving work of Christ secures for us not only acceptance before God and forgiveness of sins but transformation – a “new heart” programmed (as it were) after God’s law (Jer. 31:31-34). This is why it is such a misunderstanding to think that Christianity is all about Do’s and Don’ts. Genuine religion is about the inner man – the heart. This is why legalism always fails. Guiding external behavior with rules and regulations only goes so far. What is needed is a *heart to do* what is right. This is why repentance is so necessary to transformation – there must be a change of mind and heart before behavioral progress will be made. If you struggle with a given sin, the path of progress will be marked first by genuine repentance and a change of heart.

Your heart is who you are. “As he thinks in his heart, so is he” (Prov. 23:7 KJV). It’s like that old saying, “You’re not what you think you are, but what you think, you are.” Your “heart” is the real *you*.

And it is because the heart is who we are, and because who and what we are inwardly determines everything about us, this sage wisely exhorts his son, “Above all else, guard your heart.” “Guard your heart with all diligence, for out of it are the issues of life.” Protect it from evil influence. Feed it wholesome thoughts, healthful thoughts. Make sure its influences are wisdom-oriented. Don’t let your heart linger on sensual or covetous thoughts. Don’t nurse bitter feelings or resentment or greed or selfishness or anger. Don’t let sin infect your heart and steer the course of your life astray. Be careful what you think about. Be careful what you watch. Be careful what you listen to. Be careful that your continual exposure to evil around you does not desensitize you to sin and foolishness. “Above all else, guard your heart.” “Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it are the issues of life.” As Moses says, “apply your heart to wisdom” (Ps. 90:12 KJV). Read God’s Word, and think on it when you get up in the morning and all day long (Dt. 6:6ff). Hide it in your heart as a protective against sin (Ps. 119:11). “Think on things that are above” (Col. 3:1). Guard your heart.

This is why this wise father presses his son so not just to conform outwardly but to imbibe his teaching and prize it in his heart. This is what the admonitions of Proverbs 1-9 are all about – “Listen to wisdom! Program your mind after what is wise.” Why? Because this will determine everything else about you. Everything about you stems from what you are inwardly. And so you must give every diligence to guard your heart and protect it from evil influences.

I suspect this idea of the central importance of the heart explains the connection to verses 24-27.

- Verse 24: “O be careful, little tongue, what you say!”
- Verse 25: “O be careful, little eyes, what you see!”
- Verses 26-27: “O be careful, little feet, where you go!”

The point here is not only that we must avoid saying and looking at things we shouldn’t and going places we should not go. Of course that is *at least* what he has in mind. But it’s more than that. When you engage in talk about things that are not wholesome or let your eyes wander to things unhealthful or deviate in your path even a few degrees off center and walk in the counsel of the wicked or in the way of sinners (Ps. 1:1), it will deform your heart and skew everything about you. If you are wise, you will guard your heart carefully lest a diseased heart steer your life into regret.

Instead, make the things of God your topic of conversation (Josh. 1:8). Fellowship with people who influence you to wisdom and righteousness. When you pick up your Bible and read, you are not just fulfilling some obligation of behavior – you’re guarding your heart. When you think on it and mull over its meaning and memorize it, you’re guarding your heart. When you spend time with other Christians and observe their walk with Christ, you’re guarding your heart. When you fellowship with them and engage in wholesome conversation, you’re guarding your heart. And that is the very most important thing about you.

I suppose every parent has had to answer his child who wants to go to this or that event. You’ve said “No,” but the child wants to know why. Because you’ve said “No” is sufficient, but you want to teach your child too. And so you explain. Often it’s not that the given event or activity is itself wrong – it’s just that the circumstances of the event are not such that promise the influence of wisdom but of folly. It’s better for your children’s heart that they not go, and it’s in the interest of their heart that you don’t allow them to go. And it is the same for all of us at every age.

The importance of Proverbs 4:23 is just massive. That’s what it says – it’s life shaping. The heart determines everything about us. “Guard your heart with all diligence, for out of it are the issues of life.”

This principle is reflected in the New Testament also. In Colossians 3 the apostle Paul famously launches into an extended exhortation regarding Christian behavior. He commands us against such things as immorality, malice, slander, and obscene talk. He commands concerning relationships in the home and the workplace. And he commands us to such virtues as compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, and unity. All this is enormously important. But he couches it all in terms of the inner man. We are to be people whose ambitions are set on “things above,” people in whose heart the “peace of God” rules, and people in whose heart the

Word of Christ “dwells richly.” And we are to be people who do all for the glory of Christ. In short, we are to be people who are transformed from the inside out.

Now of course what this passage from Proverbs ought to do is drive us to see our need of Christ. What we need is what the new covenant promises in him – a new heart (Ezek. 36:26; Lk. 22:19-20). We’ve experienced that in part, and, thankfully, it shows. But we look forward to the day when this work of God in us will be complete (1Jn. 3:2), and until then we must strive to “be what we are.” We must guard our hearts – deny evil influence and pursue every good influence. Our concern is not only right behavior externally – what we do or don’t do. Our concern is who and what we are inwardly. And so we must not only guard and protect our hearts – we must nourish them carefully and strengthen them in grace. “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly” so that this wisdom of God shapes you from the inside out. Approach the Scriptures with this conviction driving you – that this is good for my heart, nourishment and protection from foolishness and regret.

We Calvinists make much of the fact that it is ultimately only the sovereign God who can change the heart. That a necessary emphasis. And it’s a truth we revel in. But let us never forget that the sovereign God who changes the heart uses means to do it. “Of his own will he brought us forth” (Jms. 1:18) – that’s a wonderful truth. But we must complete the verse: “Of his own will he brought us forth *by the word of truth.*” It is by means of his Word that we all were given life and were converted. And it is by that same Word our transformation of heart continues. Keep, guard, protect – indeed, *strengthen* – your heart by feeding it the things of God. Do this “diligently” so as to shape the course of a life without regret.

What verse 23 means, very simply, is that you cannot expect spiritual success without continued and prolonged attention to God’s Word on the one hand and careful avoidance of sinful influences on the other.

Following the family context here again we should see this as a model for parents. What this father wants is to protect and direct his son’s heart to wisdom and away from folly. That’s the parent’s responsibility in a nutshell – direct your child’s heart to wisdom and away from folly. And teach them the importance of it. Make sure they know that this is life-shaping business: “Keep your heart, for out of it flow the springs of life.” Life is in large measure the result of choices we make, so guard the heart in order to ensure wise choices. Guard the heart.

And this is every bit as important for Dad and Mom too. “Guard your heart, for out of it flow the issues of life.”

God give us a heart shaped by wisdom – for his honor and for our own good.

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