

Keep Your Heart

Proverbs 4:20-27 | Bryce Beale | April 2, 2017

The first presidential debate that Americans watched on television aired in 1960. John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon were the candidates present, and both held their own.

Those who listened to the argumentation on the radio concluded that the two had come out about even after the first round. But those who watched the event on television were confident that Kennedy had won the day.

Why?

Kennedy had been campaigning outdoors and appeared on television with a healthy glow, and his mannerisms were comfortable. Nixon, on the other hand, had just recovered from a knee injury. He had lost twenty pounds, wore a 5 o' clock shadow, looked pale, and wore an unflattering suit.

When voters took to the polls, the race was neck and neck, but Kennedy won. Statistics later showed that the televised debates probably determined the outcome of the election. Television, in a sense, chose the president.¹

This does not surprise us. We know well the power of appearance among men and women. The events of everyday confirm the LORD's words to Samuel: "Man looks on the outward appearance."²

If God has granted you the genetic code for a certain shape of face and jaw, an angle of the nose, a positioning of the eyes, all of which align with what the culture today considers beautiful, then you will be treated well for your DNA.

Do not mistake me—a beautiful face is a good thing. But it is far from the best thing; far from a necessary thing. And often it clouds our judgment.

How does the LORD finish his instruction to Samuel?

"Man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart."³

¹ "The Kennedy-Nixon Debates," History.com, A+E Networks, <http://www.history.com/topics/us-presidents/kennedy-nixon-debates> (published 2010; accessed April 1, 2017).

² 1 Samuel 16:7 (ESV).

³ Ibid.

The heart, friends!

I do not mean your love or feelings alone, which is what we often mean by that word. I mean it in the Bible sense—your heart, that is, your inner self, the real you that hides beneath skin and bones. I mean that part of you that outlasts your mortal body, the part that is not affected when you lose a limb. Your thoughts, your affections, your personality, your will—your very center. That is your heart. It is your inner, secret person. It is you.

When God looks at you, your appearance is burnt away like the earth one day will be, and your façade is rolled up like a scroll. All that covers you flees, and there is no place found for it.

“No creature,” say the Scriptures, “is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.”⁴

We all hide behind appearances; close friends know us closely, but even they behold to some degree only the tip of an iceberg. The real us is submerged.

But God sees us. God sees your inner self, your hidden self—God right now sees your heart.

Today then, we leave behind us all consideration of appearance. You may be tall or short, or consider yourself beautiful or unattractive. We step into the throne room of God and all these thoughts disintegrate in the intense heat of his glorious presence. The surface melts away, and what remains is only your innermost self.

Today we consider your heart, and your heart alone.

PROVERBS 4:20-27

The heart is like an aquifer. The water of our souls is buried deep within the ground, and by pressure it is driven up to the surface, so that a spring is formed; from there our inner water ever flows out before the sight of others.

Verse 23 makes this clear, in the second half of it: “for from it [your heart] flow the springs of life.”

In keeping with our text, I mean to do two things this morning. First, I want to consider more closely what is said about the heart itself in verse 23. How important is the heart, and why? After we have decided this, I want to use the verses both before and after the 23rd to show *how* one guards the heart, which is the command in verse 23. In other words,

⁴ Hebrews 4:13.

how is the heart like a spring, and then, how do we keep the spring clear of impurities?

The spring of life

First, then, how is your heart like the spring of your life?

I answer, “Your heart is like a spring in that it shoots out into the world whatever waters are stored in your aquifer, underground.” Whatever you truly are, this, like a small rudder hidden beneath the sea, will guide the ship of your entire life. Your decisions and thoughts and activity depend entirely upon your heart.

Proverbs itself teaches this. Your heart holds the puppeteering string attached to your decision-making, as chapter 6 will prove: “a heart,” it reads, “that devises wicked plans.”⁵ The heart devises your plans, whether those are plans of life, or plans of death.

Another string descends from your heart to your mood. In chapter 15 we read, “A glad heart makes a cheerful face, but by sorrow of heart the spirit is crushed.”⁶ When you’re happy in your heart, your face will surely show it.

Again, a string is attached to your mouth, which your heart lifts at one time, and at another time lets fall. “The heart of fools,” says chapter 12, “proclaims folly.”⁷

Hear the words of Jesus, who is wisdom incarnate, in a song of the same tune: “Out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks.” And he continues, “The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil.”⁸

Your heart is the pied piper who leads the creatures of your mind and limbs along in dance. Your heart is the underground reservoir, the storehouse of treasure; whatever comes up out of it only comes up out of it because it was first down in it.

I want to confess to you now, that there is someone in this room who makes me very angry—and it is me. Nothing and no one else can do it, for anger comes from the heart. Anger is like magma within the crust of the earth, which finally bursts up from the mouth of a volcano. To say that someone can truly *make* you angry is like saying someone might by bucket loads fill a volcano with its lava. No! The anger arises from the heart within, not from the situation without.

⁵ V. 6.

⁶ V. 13.

⁷ V. 23.

⁸ Matthew 12:34-35.

Again, you might say to me, “The future makes me anxious.” It doesn’t. “But yes,” you reply, “it does. I don’t want to worry, but I just can’t help it. The worry gets the better of me, it overtakes me.” It does not overtake you, like some enemy army. Your worry is a political coup from the inside. It arises from the heart.

Experience proves the same fact.

Think, if your worry came from your situation, then why do different people respond so differently to the same situation? Imagine that a garden snake were to slither its way through the center aisle right now. I know that some of you would shriek and flee out the side doors. But I am confident that others would not; someone here may even own pet snakes, and choose to capture this one and happily add it to his collection.

The experience is the same for the shrieker and the collector, so why the different responses? Because the hearts of each are different. It is the only suitable explanation.

Your heart is a spring of water, shooting up all that you think and say and do. Hard as you may try to hide it, the real you will be seen, at least in part, by what the outer you does.

Friends, let’s all be honest for a moment.

The Ancient Greeks inscribed in the court of one of their temples this phrase: “Know Thyself.” The Roman poet Juvenal claimed that the words had descended from heaven.⁹

He was not far from right—for our text, this command to keep your heart, requires that to some degree you know your heart, that you know yourself.

“How,” you ask? By your heart’s spring, of course.

Please, dip down now and bring a cupped handful of the waters to your lips. Taste whether what proceeds from your chest be bitter or pure. See whether the rivers are clean or foul.

Do your private musings betray a pure heart? None of us are perfectly pure, of course; but is your water drinkable? If you are the only one of your friends to think so, I would reevaluate your position.

⁹ “Know thyself,” Wikipedia.com, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Know_thyself (last modified March 24, 2017; accessed April 1, 2017).

Do you see sour faces all around you, those forced to drink of your contaminated streams? It has been said that someone will have to deal with your sin—either you will deal with it, or everyone else will.

If your water has been brown for some time, I beg you to admit this to yourself. I plead with you to allow one honest moment this morning.

And I beg this of you not to drive you to despair, but because you will never seek a cure for your heart until you admit it is sick.

A clear spring

At this point I turn our focus from the spring itself—we have proven that the issues of life proceed from the inner man, from the heart.

And now we ask, what does it mean, as our text commands in verse 23, to “keep your heart”?

Or, in other words, how do we ensure that clean water, and not foul, brown, and mucky stuff, is flowing from the spring of our hearts?

A new heart

I am sorry to say that, if you find the clogs of sin devastating your spiritual heart, if the defect of our forefather Adam’s heart has been passed down to you, then no corrective surgery can remedy the situation. You may have found that no matter your church attendance, no matter the counseling you receive, no matter your plans to change, good-intentioned and firm, you are yet bound by your sin-sickness. There is not a physician of souls under heaven who can fix the faults of your ailing heart.

But in heaven—in heaven there is a ray of hope descending.

Your need is for a new heart entirely, a transplant, so to speak. And only the Great Physician, seated in heaven at the right hand of the Majesty on high, can accomplish this.

When the blood of Jesus hit the ground on dark Golgotha, he was inaugurating a new covenant that speaks like this: “I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.”¹⁰

Once when Elisha was near the Jordan River, alongside a group of prophets felling trees, one of those prophets lost his axe head into the river. But Elisha cast a stick into the water, and it caused the iron axe head to float to the surface.

¹⁰ Ezekiel 36:26.

Your need is precisely the same. The contaminants in your spring cannot rise to the top and be removed until the wood of the cross is cast upon your waters. It may not make entire sense to you, why this should be so—why simple faith in Christ and his work upon the cross should so powerfully cleanse your heart. But if you will but cast a glance of faith at him, if you will lay your grim heart entirely in his hands, he will do what work needs to be done.

That is the first step in cleansing your spring, and until it is done, nothing else can help.

Washing by the word

I have spoken for some time to you who are outside of Christ. But now let me turn and, taking up the words of our text in Proverbs 4, apply them to you who are in Christ.

For our text is very clear—even those who walk in the way of righteousness must keep their hearts “with all diligence.” Always the pollutants of this world, and the poisons of our old corruption, are seeking to enter our springs. How do we keep them out? How do we live life with a pure heart?

I think we are told how, first, in the verses which lead up to verse 23. See verses 20 on:

My son, be attentive to my words;
incline your ear to my sayings.
Let them not escape from your sight;
keep them within your heart.
For they are life to those who find them,
and healing to all their flesh.

You guard your heart, controlling what sort of water comes from it, by extremely careful attention to the word of God. “My son, be attentive to my words.”

See how every part of you must reach out toward this word, if you are to catch it.

“Incline your *ear* to my sayings.” Or we might say, do not listen to sermons lazily, but urgently, determinedly. Strain your ear to hear every word, whenever the words of God are read aloud, or spoken by a friend, or proclaimed from a pulpit. Fill your ears with worshipful and solid songs; fill them to the brim with the cleansing word of God, and there will be no room for the world there. Such attention to God’s message to man will purify your spring.

“Let them not escape from your *sight*,” verse 21 begins. In Hebrew, it reads not “sight,” but “eyes.” May the Bible be ever in your eyes—read

it! The beginning of reading the Bible is this: read the Bible! And in all your reading, study it too.

And the verse continues: “keep them within your *heart*.” We might say, meditate on Scripture until it sinks into your skin. Memorize passages and mull them over in your mind. The Bible is like a mint, not to be swallowed all at once but to be rolled around in your mouth until it melts. Then it will enter into your heart.

If you are intent on having a pure heart, there is nothing else for it. You must throw yourself entirely into the word of God. If the word is not often in your mind, then the world will be.

I merely repeat what Paul commanded to young Timothy: “Immerse yourself” in these things.¹¹

George Mueller, the German-born pastor who provided care for more than 10,000 orphans in his lifetime, was speaking to a group of younger believers when he was 71 years old. He said:

For the first four years after my conversion I made no progress, because I neglected the Bible. But when I regularly read on through the whole with reference to my own heart and soul, I directly made progress. Then my peace and joy continued more and more. Now I have been doing this for 47 years. I have read through the whole Bible about 100 times and I always find it fresh when I begin again. Thus my peace and joy have increased more and more.¹²

Lest you think that after 100 times of reading the Bible over 47 years, you needn't read it any longer, take note: Mueller redoubled his Bible reading efforts in his later years, so that by the time he died at age 92 he had read through the Bible 200 times.¹³

Our text in verse 22 shows the consequence: you will have “life” and “healing to all [your] flesh.”

The word of God is no empty word for you, but your very life—that is, your spiritual happiness rests upon your involvement with this book, for

¹¹ 1 Timothy 4:15.

¹² George Mueller, *A Narrative of Some of the Lord's Dealing with George Muller, Written by Himself, Jehovah Magnified. Addresses by George Muller Complete and Unabridged*, 2 vols. (Muskegon, MI: Dust and Ashes, 2003), 2:834, qtd. in John Piper, “George Mueller’s Strategy for Showing God: Simplicity of Faith, Sacred Scripture, and Satisfaction in God,” *DesiringGod.org*, <http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/george-muellers-strategy-for-showing-god#76> (February 3, 2004; accessed April 2, 2017).

¹³ Piper, “George Mueller’s Strategy.”

through this book God sets his scalpel to your heart and cuts away those parts that should not be there.

If therefore you devote yourself to the study and practice of these pages, you will find the waters of your heart over time to grow sweeter.

Single mindedness

But it is not Bible reading alone that alters the purity of your spring. Let me end my message this morning where our text does. See that an attitude is required, in verses 25 to 27.

Put away from you crooked speech,
and put devious talk far from you.
Let your eyes look directly forward,
and your gaze be straight before you.
Ponder the path of your feet;
then all your ways will be sure.
Do not swerve to the right or to the left;
turn your foot away from evil.

The attitude required, if you really are concerned to find clear waters at your spring, to have pure heart, is an attitude of single-mindedness.

Every member of your body must be employed in plowing straight ahead. Your mouth must not be crooked nor deviate from the way; your eyes must look directly forward; and your foot must not turn to the right or to the left.

Brothers and sisters, you have nothing more important than your heart. If you should have the most pleasant face and body, but a heart that has its eyes on the ends of the earth, that turns right and left at every wind and whim, that prostrates itself before gross idols, that is stubborn as the donkey which will not follow unless you force it—if you have, in other words, a pretty surface with death and poison underneath, you are like a golden ring hung in the snout of a pig.

But if you have a pure heart, then Jesus calls you blessed: “Blessed are the pure in heart,” he says, “for they shall see God.”¹⁴

Again, the Psalmist asks,

Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD?
And who shall stand in his holy place?¹⁵

And all that is within us cries, “Let it be me!” We who have tasted of the goodness of our Savior crave to taste yet more. You who know the preciousness of the glory of our God would give your hands and feet to

¹⁴ Matthew 5:8.

¹⁵ Psalm 24:3.

be allowed a glimpse of the unfathomable. I would empty today my bank account, sell every possession, if only I might have this pearl of great price, this one thing, to gaze upon the LORD in his beauty.

“Who shall ascend his hill?” we beg of the Psalmist. “Ask of us any toll price and we will pay it.” And he answers, “He who has clean hands and *a pure heart.*”¹⁶

Brothers and sisters, then let us set our face.

Remember the apostle Paul—see how his face is doggedly set and refuses to deviate from the Way. His friends have tears in their eyes; they know that in Jerusalem Paul may very likely be met with mob and prison bars and sword. But he refuses to turn his face. He says, “What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.”¹⁷ Forgetting what lies behind, Paul had set his face forward to what lies ahead. He had put his hand to the plow and refused to look back. He would not be made a pillar of salt like Lot’s wife.

And if Paul’s example is not enough to compel you to press on straight ahead, then turn your eyes upon Jesus. His wonderful face is set as well. In Luke we read, “When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.”¹⁸

Christians, Jesus gave the contents of his heart in Jerusalem, so that he might have the contents of yours.

This morning he has pushed aside your appearance and your circumstances, and he stands with his word in hand like a two-edged sword. And as I speak, he hurls down his sword at your exposed heart. His desire for your complete and uncontested affections is violent.

So let us set our faces this morning, let us make a renewed resolution. We will keep our hearts for Christ alone. Go up onto the high places, and tear down the pillars and the Asherah. Cast out Moloch, pull down the altar of Baal; bury your idols under the terebinth tree and be done with them.

Walk straight ahead, your heart preserved in your hands, and extend it to the Lord your God.

And when our Savior kneels to drink from your spring, may he be refreshed by pure waters, cleansed at their source.

¹⁶ V. 4, emphasis mine.

¹⁷ Acts 21:13.

¹⁸ Luke 9:51; cf. Isaiah 50:7.