

Guard your heart

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning, everyone. As John mentioned, the last two Sundays we've started to look at the book of Proverbs and we looked at the beginning chapters, if you were here, of Proverbs, the first nine chapters that act as a kind of prologue to introduce us to this idea of wisdom, what it's all about, and how we get it and why we need it.

And so that's what we've looked at already. And so now what we're going to do this morning is dive into the Proverbs themselves. And I'm going to look just at one of them this morning because Proverbs are meant to be read, especially when you get to the individual Proverbs, they're meant to be read individually.

We're meant to understand them as single units of thought, as these pearls of wisdom. And so it's important, like we do this morning, to look at each of them in turn.

And as I say, we don't have time this year to look at every single one in the book of Proverbs. That's what you're going to do at home over time, but we're going to look at some key ones. And so this morning we're going to look at Proverbs 4, verse 23, which is this, and it'll appear on the screen behind me.

So above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life. That's what we're going to look at this morning and seek to understand that. Now Proverbs, as I said, are not designed to be read quickly, but rather to be read carefully.

[1 : 2 1] You've got to consider each word or phrase in a proverb and really chew over what it means. And of course, if you've got different English translations of the original Hebrew, it's important to look sometimes at the different translations to get a deeper understanding of what the underlying words mean.

And so we're going to use this translation. This is the NIV 84. But I want to start by looking at one word in that proverb, and that is the word heart.

Above all else, guard your heart. If we're going to understand what this proverb means, we need to understand what the word heart actually means. What does it mean, the word heart? What is your heart? Is it just an organ in your body?

Or is it more than that when we talk about the heart? When you say that you have a broken heart, do you just mean that the blood pumping muscle in your chest is malfunctioning?

Or do you mean something more than that? When we say someone puts their heart into their work, what do we mean? We talk about being wholehearted. We talk about having your heart set on something.

[2 : 2 9] Because the truth is, when we say heart, when we say the word heart, when we use it in ordinary conversation, we mean so much more, don't we, than just a physical organ in your chest. Well, that's especially true when the Bible talks about heart.

When you come across the word heart in the Bible, in both Hebrew and Greek, but especially from the Hebrew culture where the Old Testament was written from, that word heart had such a deep meaning.

To a Hebrew, the heart was central to who you were. Your heart. It was the source of not just your blood pumping through your body, but it was the source of your emotions.

It was the source of your desires. It was the source of your thoughts and your decisions in life. That's what the Hebrew understanding of heart was.

And so this proverb, to guard your heart, means so much more than just, you know, protect your blood pumping muscle in your chest. Which, by the way, is good advice. You should.

[3 : 29] But that's not what, this proverb is not talking about the physical heart so much as the bigger idea of what heart really means. And so what it's saying is that you need to guard the source of your thoughts and your desires.

You've got to identify where those things come from. Why do you want what you want? Why do you head in a particular direction in life? Why do you think what you think and say what you say? Well, it all comes from somewhere.

And you've got to keep watch over that. Keep watch over the source of these things, which is your heart. And it's a very important bit of wisdom, isn't it? Because I wonder how much thought you give to guarding your heart.

I wonder if you actually make any conscious effort each day to guard your heart. And even thought to how we even go about doing that. Because we're so busy concentrating on what's outside of ourselves, aren't we?

Career and relationships and, you know, responsibilities. Abilities. We spend our days from the moment we wake up in the morning. We're thinking about these things outside of us.

[4 : 36] We're thinking about these things in life that we've got to deal with. How often do we stop and look inside? We're so busy looking outside, aren't we? Well, that's what this proverb is challenging us to do this morning.

To look inside. To stop and look in our own hearts. To pay attention to what's going on in your heart. And the reason it gives that it's important for you to pay attention to what's going on inside.

Is because the heart, it says, is the wellspring of life. Or literally, from it your life flows. Or from it your life issues. That's what the original says.

And what it means is that whatever your life consists of on the outside. Actually comes from the inside. It makes sense. It's quite obvious if you think about it. But everything that you do and say.

Your words, for example, come from your heart. Jesus says in the passage that John read for us at the beginning of the service. Jesus says, out of the overflow of the heart does the mouth speak.

[5 : 34] But it's not just your words. Your actions. Your decisions. The way you deal with other people. The way you've dealt with people this week. Are all determined by what's inside your heart.

Charles Spurgeon. A great 19th century preacher. He compares the human heart to a reservoir. From which a multitude of pipes flow out to supply water to the population.

It's a great illustration. Of course now as Capetonians. We're also aware that our water has to come from somewhere. Because it doesn't fall from the sky.

With us all the time. Recently. Although recently we can thank God that it has been falling more. And our reservoirs have started to fill up. Of course that doesn't mean we mustn't save water still.

So please do. But we know, don't we? That our water comes from somewhere. When we turn our taps on. That water is precious. And it's coming from a dam or a reservoir somewhere.

[6 : 36] And it's coming through a network of pipes. That's been established under the ground. All flowing to different places. To homes and schools and offices. But all coming from a single source.

All fed. So the idea is that all of these pipes are fed out. But from one source. That's what the human artist says Spurgeon. It's a great reservoir of thoughts and feelings and attitudes.

Which come out in a multitude of different ways in your life. So he says this. I quote. Our life flows through different pipes. The mouth. The hand.

The eye. But still all the activities of hand, of eye, of lip. Derive their source from the great fountain and central reservoir. The heart.

So what's interesting now about this proverb. To guard our hearts. Is its relation to the proverbs that follow it. So have a look in your Bibles.

[7 : 34] Unlike most proverbs from chapter 10 onwards. Especially in this book. Which are single kind of stand-alone proverbs. This proverb in chapter 4. Is part of a set. A little set of connected proverbs.

That Richard read for us earlier. And if you look at them. They all. From verse 24 onwards. They all speak about the different pipes. Out of which our life flows.

Using Spurgeon's illustration. So verse 24. Keep your mouth free of perversity. Keep corrupt talk from your lips. Notice the body parts here.

Verse 25. Let your eyes look straight ahead. Verse 26. Give careful thought to the paths of your feet. And so you see all these body parts represent the different expressions of our life.

The different pipes out of which our life flows. If you like. Your lips represent your speech. Your feet represent your decisions. Your course in life. Your eyes represent what you're focusing on.

[8 : 32] What you're taken up with. And we're told to give thought to each of those things. Each of those parts of our life. But before all of them. Is this proverb.

Above all else. Keep watch over your heart. Because all of these other pipes flow from your heart. And that's why we're told to keep watch over the heart above all else.

But sadly many people don't do that. People tend to focus more on the outward stuff. Rather than the inward stuff. On the outward expressions of the heart.

On the pipes if you like. Rather than the reservoir itself. People concentrate on changing their specific behavior and words. Rather than where those things actually come from.

And you see it all over. People who live by rules. Who are very careful to say and do the right things. Very religious people. People that we would call good people.

[9 : 33] They're you know upright moral. Upstanding members of society. You see these moral people in the great law based religions. Of Islam and Judaism. And their lifestyle is very admirable.

You look at a Muslim and often. You know his lifestyle is one to admire. He's very studious and very good. Interested at obeying the rules. Because they prioritize right behavior over all other things.

And I'm not just talking about Muslims for example. That's an example of a law based religion. But you get you get all to in even in Christian circles. Even in church. You get people who are very sticklers for living by the rules.

Prioritizing behavior. And the sermons you hear from this group of people are all about obeying the rules. Behaving well. But the problem is.

Nice as that may sound. They are focusing on the pipes. Rather than the reservoir. You understand what I'm saying? They're focused on behavior modification.

[10 : 36] Rather than heart modification. And that's where they fall short. It's a problem. Because think about it. What's the point of having the most polished pipes you can have.

If the water in the reservoir is still poison. Who cares about what the pipes are like? So that's one type of people. You get other types of people. Who don't focus so much on the pipes.

But they'll focus on the pumps that push the water out. That give you good water pressure in your shower. The problem they say is not that we're...

It's not that the behavior is wrong. It's that we're not actually living according to what's in our heart. They say no, no, no. You've got to let what's in your heart out.

Your heart is not flowing into your life properly. You're not passionate about things. You know, we're just going through the motions in life. We're getting up, going to work, coming home, watching TV, going to bed, and then going to work again.

[11 : 33] Without any passion. Without any motivation. Or purpose. And so the solution, they would say, is to find your passion in life. Have you heard people like that? Be passionate about something.

Find your passion. Pursue your passion. Live your dreams. Let that flow out of your life. And that's the best way to live. It's all about motivating yourself.

It's why people pay motivational speakers. Because they want them to come and rouse them to get excited about something. People just aren't excited enough. We need to be excited.

It's why people buy self-help books. So they can get inspired and pursue their passions. Because if everyone would just live their passion, then the world would be a better place.

Although it wouldn't. Because, I mean, what if your passion is killing people? You know, it's not all about just pursuing your passions. What's the good of being passionate if the source of your passion is corrupt?

[12 : 32] It's all about going back to the source, isn't it? You know, the water company can have the best pumps in the world to create the best water pressure for your shower. But if the water that it's getting from the reservoir is dirty, what's the point of having high-pressure showers?

Because, in fact, the better the pumps, the worse things might be. The dirtier you'll get when you go showering. So that won't do. So then there are other types of people, opposite to those types, who say, No, no, no.

The real problem is actually about controlling what you express from your heart. It's about self-discipline. And so they don't concentrate so much on the pipes or the pumps, but rather on the valves that restrict the flow of water out of the reservoir.

They're into water rationing. They're like that city of Cape Town official whose job it would be to switch off the taps if Day Zero ever came. These people say, we need to learn restraint to live properly.

We need to learn control of our emotions. And they're very good at choosing their words well, controlling their thoughts, keeping a lid on their emotions. They're very Zen.

[13 : 40] You know those type of people? And it's admirable, that kind of self-control. You see a lot of it in Buddhism, religions like that, which aren't so much about keeping rules, but rather denying yourself and denying your cravings and achieving Zen, achieving peace, Nirvana.

And if we could all do that, if we could just control ourselves, find self-control, then the world would be a better place. That's what they say. But again, think about that.

Restricting the flow of water, good as that may be, doesn't solve the problem. It just hides the problem for a time, doesn't it? If the problem's at the source, at the reservoir itself, then that's where you need to go.

That's where you need to concentrate. And that's what this proverb challenges us to do this morning. It challenges us to begin in the right place. Not look at the pipes or the pumps or try to restrict the flow, but to look at our hearts, to start there, to start at the source.

But we don't, do we? We look everywhere else to try to fix the problems of the world, to try to fix the problems of our lives, except at the source.

[14 : 53] This is the heart. Our very own heart is the last place we look. Why? Why don't we tend to go to our hearts? Why are we so reluctant to look inside?

Well, because we're afraid of what we'll find when we do. I've said it before in another sermon sometime, but I'll say it again. Imagine for a second that all the thoughts and desires you've had over this past week in your heart of hearts, all those thoughts, all those desires, all those attitudes were recorded on a DVD and screened for your entire family and friends to watch.

Would you want that? I don't think so. I wouldn't. All right? Because we don't want to admit what's in our hearts, let alone let other people see what's in our hearts, do we?

We don't go there. That's off limits. We concentrate on everything else, but we don't want to talk about what's inside our hearts.

Although if the problem is ever going to be solved, you need to come to terms with what's in your own heart. And that's what the Bible helps you to do. When we open the Bible, it is a mirror to our own hearts, and that's often why people don't want to read the Bible, because of what they'll find out about themselves.

[16 : 19] But the Bible helps us to examine our hearts. For example, God sent the prophet Jeremiah to the nation of Israel to challenge them to examine their hearts. And he said, this is the words of Jeremiah, The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure.

And they didn't like him very much for saying that, because they were religious, very religious. They had the shiniest water pipes, if you like. They didn't want to admit there was a problem with the reservoir itself, because they were so concentrating on ticking boxes and doing the right things.

God also said through Isaiah, These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. He was talking about one of the pipes.

And that is very shiny, but the reservoir was corrupted. They honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. These religious Israelites were very careful about outward appearances, as many people are today.

But they neglected their hearts. Jesus, when asked about Jewish ritual purification and what causes defilement, what causes someone to be defiled before God, He said this, this is from Mark 7.

[17 : 32] He says, Nothing that enters a person from outside can defile them. What comes out of a person is what defiles them, for it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come.

Sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance, folly, all these evils come from inside and defile a person.

This is such an important teaching, because we look outside to this world and say, No, the problem in the world is there. It's in politics. It's in governments. It's in crime.

It's in this. It's in corruption. It's in that. Jesus says, No, it's not. It's there. It's inside your heart. That's where the problem is. From within, out of a person's heart, evil comes.

And so the Bible is quite clear, that the problem is not first and foremost out there, and the problem is not even in our behavior per se. The problem is in our hearts.

[18 : 34] And that's where the change needs to happen for each of us. And that's what we need to address. That's what this proverb challenges us to do. And that's exactly what wise people in the Bible realize.

Like David, when he cried out in a psalm, Psalm 51, he just cried out in anguish, and he said, Create in me a pure heart, O God. He realized that his heart was the problem.

And do you know what? God, in his mercy, was willing to answer David's prayer in his plan of salvation. In fact, his plan all along has been to do exactly what David prayed, to create a pure heart in his people.

To change their hearts. That was God's plan to fix this world. Not to change outside stuff, but to change us from the inside out. So listen, for example, to what he promises through the prophet Ezekiel.

He says this, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you. I will remove from you your heart of stone and I will give you a heart of flesh.

[19 : 46] And I will put my spirit in you to move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. So that's God's solution for the human problem.

It's to change the human heart. Your heart and my heart. Because that's where it starts. That's where everything else starts. Where everything else flows from. And that's why Jesus came to earth.

Jesus came to this planet not just to clean up our pipes or pumps or valves, you know, the outward expressions of our life.

Jesus came to earth not to give us a list of rules to live by. So many people think he did. So many people think Jesus came to this earth to be a great teacher and to give us some precepts to live our life according to.

No, he didn't come to deal with the outward expressions. Jesus came to change our hearts. And he did it in the strangest of ways.

[20 : 47] He did it by dying on the cross. How does that change our hearts? Well, you see, when he took the sins of his people on himself, when he swapped places with his people and took their punishment, took the wrath of God that was due to them on himself, stood in their place and secured eternal life and righteousness for them.

When you realize that he did that for you, if you are one of his people and you believe that and you apprehend that for your life, that Jesus took my sins, all of my sins, he took my place, he lived the life I should have lived and he did it out of love for me.

When you realize that for the first time, that is a heart-changing moment. It's why it's called conversion. It's why Jesus called it being born again.

Because if you truly believe that, it changes you from the inside out. When you truly get what Jesus did for you, you can never be the same again. That's how the gospel changes hearts.

That's God's plan to fix this world, to change our hearts. The thing is, has it for you? Has it done that yet?

[22 : 11] You may have heard the gospel countless times, but has it changed your heart? I don't care if you've heard the gospel, but has it affected you deep down inside?

Has it affected your desires and your goals and your passions in life? Are those different than what they would have been before you heard the gospel? Examine yourself.

Examine your heart. Is it different because of the gospel this morning? Or is it the same as it would have been? I'm not asking whether you come to church.

By definition, you do, obviously. I'm not asking whether you live a good life or how well you control your emotions. I'm asking whether Jesus has got deep enough in your life to change your heart yet.

Are you truly converted? If not, then let him in. Let him come and change your heart. Let him do that work which God promised to do through the prophets.

[23 : 16] Come to him because that is why he came to you to change your heart and we all need a heart change. And if you have done that, if you are converted, if you have, if you've come to truly apprehend and believe the gospel and that has changed your life and you've been born again, well then, does that mean that we should just ignore this proverb now that Jesus has actually fixed the source of the problem?

Do we have to pay attention to this proverb to guard our hearts at all? Well, yes, because now that Jesus has cleaned up the reservoir, there's more reason than ever to keep watch over it, isn't it?

To guard it. to watch our hearts more than ever before. In fact, this proverb is pretty pointless unless Jesus has done that. What's the point of guarding a corrupt heart? What's the point of keeping watch over a poisoned reservoir?

No, now that you're converted, you must put this proverb into practice in your daily life and keep watch over the new heart that Jesus has created in you because you're still living in a broken world with sin knocking at your door every day.

And so, guard your heart. How do you do that? Let's think about that. How do we practically guard our hearts like this proverb is telling us to do? Well, for that, we must turn to Philipians chapter 4 which I encourage you to do in your Bibles.

[24 : 41] It's what John read for us earlier. And I think Philipians chapter 4 has some great wisdom advice about how we can practically guard our hearts in our daily lives.

So, let's read it. From verse 4. It says, Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again, rejoice. Let your gentleness be evident to all.

The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation by prayer and petition with thanksgiving, present your requests to God and the peace of God which transcends all understanding will guard your hearts and minds and minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable, if anything is excellent or praiseworthy, think about such things.

I just want to stop there and look at, just from this passage, three ways that we can guard our hearts, guard the reservoir to ensure that there's a constant flow of good water into the rest of our lives, into the pipes of our lives.

[25 : 55] And the three things are these. firstly, keep it full. Keep your reservoir full. Keep your heart full. Rejoice in the Lord always.

So how does a Christian maintain a full heart to avoid a life of spiritual drought? Well, you learn to rejoice in God every day. You learn to delight in who God is.

And you find out who He is in the Bible. the more you read the Bible, the more you learn what to rejoice in, in God, what He's done, who He is, His attributes, His excellencies, His perfections.

We were made to delight in that above all His gifts. We were made to delight in the giver. We were made to know God and find our full happiness and satisfaction in knowing God and in rejoicing in Him.

but it's God's Word, of course, which reveals God to us. And so, opening God's Word in our daily lives is like letting streams of fresh water from the mountain come in and keep the reservoir full.

[27 : 08] So are you reading the Word to keep your heart full of God or are you keeping it closed at home and letting all the water evaporate from the reservoir? keep your heart full by rejoicing in God as He's revealed Himself to be.

Secondly, keep your heart pure. Keep the reservoir pure. Look at verse 8. Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable, if anything is excellent or praiseworthy, think about such things.

In other words, it's saying, learn to control what comes into the reservoir. Learn to control because you do have control over what you let into your heart.

Because pollution can get in there too. From all kinds of sources, from friends we spend time with, movies we watch, books we read, internet sites we visit, we can let pollution and muck into the reservoir.

And so you've got to learn to control access into your heart. You've got to learn to let in what is pure and limit what is polluted. There will be certain movies that Christians won't watch, certain jokes we won't indulge in, not because we're being prudish, but because we're being wise to control what we let into our hearts, which the world doesn't even know the first thing about doing.

[28 : 33] So keep it pure. And finally, keep it calm. Now admittedly, this is where my illustration falls apart. Because water can be supplied from a physical reservoir no matter what the weather conditions, whether it's stormy, whether it's calm, it doesn't matter, but it's not the same for a human heart.

No, when our hearts are not at peace, then the flow is affected, isn't it? How it flows into our lives can be seen. When you're anxious, when you're stressed, it affects how you talk to others, doesn't it?

It affects how you behave. It affects how you live. And so, we're told in Philippians 4, verse 6, don't be anxious about anything.

Because if the reservoir is not at peace, then that'll be seen in how it flows into our lives. That anxiety flows into those pipes, too.

Do not be anxious, therefore, about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God, and the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

[29 : 45] And our hearts are prone to all kinds of storms, aren't they? It's almost like we're living life from one crisis to the next. It might be a small crisis or a big crisis, but it's one storm to the next storm to the next storm.

It just seems like, what storm am I going to face this week? You know, our hearts are prone to storms. Storms on the outside, circumstances, worries, stress about finances, job, relationships, health, whatever.

Storms on the inside of conscience and guilt that gnaw away at us. All kinds of storms. But you see, Jesus already showed us, didn't he, that he can calm storms.

He did it physically on the Sea of Galilee. And I don't think it was just to show us his power. I think it was to show us that he has power over all kinds of chaos, all the chaos that we struggle with in our lives, all the storms that we face.

Jesus has the power with a word to still that storm. Because the gospel, what he did when he came to earth, when you believe that, that's what calms those storms.

[30 : 58] Because the gospel tells us that no matter what's going on in our lives, we can at any moment approach our heavenly father, the creator and sustainer of this universe.

We can have him in perfect relationship. We can approach the throne of grace with confidence, knowing that our sins are already forgiven, that the slate is wiped clear, and that we can therefore come to God as a child comes to a parent, and we can rest in knowing that he's in control.

Which is what the gospel and only the gospel allows us to do. And so through prayer, through the great gift of prayer, we can leave our worries and all our anxieties and all our storms in God's hands and step back and trust him.

And that is a peace that you can not get anywhere else in this world. But you can get it in the gospel of Jesus Christ. And so the gospel, you see, doesn't only change our heart, it guards our heart every day.

The gospel doesn't only convert you and cause you to be born again when you believe in it, but the gospel every day is the means by which we keep our reservoir safe.

[32 : 20] We keep it full, we keep it pure, we keep it calm. As we keep coming back to the gospel, you never graduate from the gospel. You always keep coming back to that, what Jesus did on the cross for you.

And we must keep coming back to it like we're going to do in a moment through the Lord's Supper. This is the way that God gave us to keep coming back to the gospel, to calm our hearts again, to rejoice in God again.

Because our hearts depend on that. Your heart depends on communion in a way. Because communion is a reminder of the gospel and your heart depends on you coming back to the gospel.

And so, above all else, guard your heart for it is the wellspring of life. Let's pray. Yes, Lord, we thank you for the wisdom that you've given us in this single proverb.

The importance of examining our hearts and guarding our hearts. Thank you, Lord, that you've given us Jesus, that right from the beginning you have been promising to change our hearts and it's through the gospel that you have.

[33 : 30] Thank you, Lord, that Jesus came to do it all for us, to die for us, to live the life we couldn't live, and to change our hearts from the inside out.

Lord, let him do that. Let us let him do that. Let us, this coming week and beyond, help us to let Jesus into our lives properly so that he can work on our hearts every day.

And, Lord, help us to keep coming back to the gospel so that we can have our hearts refreshed, that we can have our hearts full of rejoicing in you, and that we can keep our hearts calm.

Thank you, Lord, for the relationship you've given us with you. Help us never to neglect it, but daily to live it out. And so we pray all of these things in Jesus' name.

Amen.