

The Heart – The Wellspring of Life

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Prayer of Illumination

Lord God, may your Word be a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. Amen.

Background

Proverbs is a wonderfully practical book. In it you can find insights on how to strengthen relationships and communication, and how to live responsibly and faithfully by:

- honoring our parents,
- raising well the children entrusted to our care,
- managing your household thoughtfully,
- conducting business with character,
- handling money wisely,
- nurturing integrity in our sexual lives,
- exercising leadership,
- and choosing and using our words well.

It's all in there.

There's a verse in Proverbs that sums it up well:

- *"Getting wisdom is the wisest thing you can do!"* (Proverbs 4:7)

Wisdom is living in life-giving ways: sanely, fully, joyfully, wisely, skillfully.

Proverbs is a guide to the wholehearted life.

Scripture: Proverbs 4:20-27 (NRSV)

My child, be attentive to my words;
incline your ear to my sayings.
Do not let them escape from your sight;
keep them within your heart.
For they are life to those who find them,
and healing to all their flesh.
Keep your heart with all vigilance,
for from it flow the springs of life.
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.
Keep straight the path of your feet,
and all your ways will be sure.
Do not swerve to the right or to the left;
turn your foot away from evil.

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

SERMON: The Heart – The Wellspring of Life

Our passage from Proverbs can be seen as a spiritual anatomy lesson or divine medical check-up on the most important organs of the body for the wise.

There is The Ear: Be *"all ears."* Heed the voice of wisdom.

The Eye: Keep your eyes peeled for wisdom. Don't let wisdom out of your sight. Survey your course. Look forward. Keep your gaze straight ahead.

The Mouth: Open up to the Great Physician and say *"ahhhhh."* Keep devious talk and crooked speech far from you.

Next, we look at **The Feet:** Watch your step. Or *"Ponder the path of thy feet,"* as the KJV says. Choose the straight path. Keep your feet from evil.

Or as Presbyterian minister and writer Frederick Buechner puts it:

*"If you want to know who you are, watch your feet.
Because where your feet take you, that is who you are."*

But there's a fifth part of the body mentioned in our passage that is spiritually more important than all the other parts. **The Heart:**

- *"Guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life."*

Or as the New Living Translation (NLT) phrases it:

- *"Guard your heart above all else,
for it determines the course of your life."*

In the wisdom of Proverbs, the heart is the central organ of the body. It represents your entire inner being, your personality, your emotions, your thinking, your reasoning. Who you are. The essence of your being. The heart isn't outward show, it's what is really going on inside.

- *"What proceeds out of the mouth," says Jesus, "comes from the heart."*

Let God's wisdom seep deep into your personality.

Or imagine it this way: You are like dough. Wisdom is like yeast. Let God work and knead his wisdom into your heart, and it will rise to the heights, it will be lifted up. Make a lifelong commitment to follow this wisdom, and you will be transformed, from the inside out. You'll have a change of heart, and a changed heart leads to a changed life. Just as the heart pumps blood to all the organs of the body, so our spiritual hearing, seeing, speaking, and walking flow from the condition of our heart.

Your heart has one job to do, and it does it amazingly well: it beats—unrelentingly, single-mindedly—for hours, days, and decades. Slightly more than once a second, your heart beats about 100,000 times a day—as many as 3.5 billion times in a lifetime. It's been calculated that the amount of work a heart does over a full human life is equivalent to lifting a one-ton object 150 miles into the air. The heart weighs less than a pound. It's no bigger than a fist.

Each hour your heart dispenses about 70 gallons of blood, 1680 gallons a day. In fact, more gallons of blood are pushed through you in a day than gallons of gas you will pour into your car in a year. Your heartbeat not only sends blood throughout your body, but also sends it back to your heart. It takes about 50 seconds for blood to journey through your body. 15% of your blood goes to your brain. 20% of your blood goes to your kidneys.

What's considered high blood pressure? The American Heart Association changed it in 2017 to 130/80. Now half of all American adults, 103 million people, have high blood pressure. There are a lot of people who don't even know they have high blood pressure.

There are a lot of ways the heart can falter: Skipping a beat or adding a beat which comes from electrical impulse palpitations. Arrhythmia, where the heart's rhythm is either too fast or too slow. A heart attack or cardiac arrest, two different things. A heart attack happens when blood can't get to the heart. Cardiac arrest happens when the heart stops pumping.

Medicine has made incredible inroads with bypass surgery, other procedures, and even heart transplants. In 1950 the death rate from heart disease was 600 people per 100,000. Today it has been dramatically lowered to 168 people per 100,000. But it is still the leading cause of death. 1 in 3 Americans will die of heart disease.

The heart is a powerful and common metaphor for us:

- We talk about the most important issue as “the heart of the matter.”
- To take something seriously is to “take it to heart.”

The heart represents our best and worst qualities:

- We talk about having a heart of gold, heart of stone, or the heart of a lion.
- We speak from the heart.
- We pour our heart into something.
- Or we suffer a broken heart.

The heart is mentioned 827 times in the Hebrew Scriptures alone. It is a wellspring from where life erupts. It is so precious, we don't want to pollute or muddy the waters of our heart. Don't let your heart become stagnant or brackish. Let divine wisdom keep renewing the wellspring of your life so that it might refresh, not only yourself, but others.

We're all human. So for all of us, from time to time, our wellspring becomes tainted. King David tells us what to do in these situations by crying out in the Psalms:

- *“Create in me a clean heart, O God!”*

Cleanse me God. Do a work of water purification in my heart. Filter out the impurities. Make me clean again.

And so David is described as *a man after God's own heart*. Not because he was perfect, but because he kept going back to his Source. At age twenty King Solomon, King David's son, was approached by God in a dream. Ask me for anything Solomon and I will give it. Basically, your wish is my command. What did Solomon ask for? Most English translations say, “an understanding mind.” But the Hebrew meaning is this: *“a listening heart.”* Not success, not victory, not power, not wealth. Give me God “a *listening heart*” to lead your people and discern good from evil.

We need to comprehend the Jewish understanding of *“a listening heart.”* It doesn't mean a “hearing heart.” In Jewish thought, *a listening heart* is an obedient and humble heart. Listening is an action, not just a state of being. Solomon's request for *“a listening heart”* greatly pleased God. God not only gave Solomon what he asked for, but God also gave him what he didn't ask for— riches and honor. You'll have all these Solomon. Just walk in my ways all your life. Guard and watch the *listening heart* I am giving you.

And Solomon did that for a while... but we read later that Solomon's wisdom waned. His *listening heart* became a hardened heart. His heart turned away from God and his heart wasn't true like his father David. Solomon didn't guard his heart.

So how do we guard our heart today?

The Scriptures tell us: guard your heart, keep watch over your heart by loving with all your heart—go all out. Let your life be a work of the heart. Trust with all your heart.

The previous chapter of Proverbs gives this famous guidance:

- *“Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding, in all your ways acknowledge him and he will make your paths straight.” Proverbs 3:5*

Let wisdom move from your head to your heart. Learn wisdom by heart, not just by memory. Like a planted seed in the dark earth, keep wisdom deep in your heart. Hide it in your heart, for it is life and healing. Internalize it.

Live life with an open heart, But be careful what and who you let in. Don't let in just anything or anyone that knocks on the door of your heart. Use discretion. Guard your heart more than anything you treasure. For from your heart flow the springs of life.

We have car alarms and house alarms and security alarms. We have bodyguards, security guards, lifeguards, and crossing guards. These all protect our belongings, the people we love, and the things we value. Proverbs tells us, above all these things, jewelry, houses, banks, and presidents; guard your heart.

Watch your thoughts and your desires. Exercise discretion about what you feed your soul with. You don't want to pollute it or squander it. Respect yourself. You are a child of God, a daughter or son of the Most High. Know that there are times to say yes, and times to say no. Be careful who you share your heart with, what you share on social media. Don't expose yourself to things that will bring you down. Don't fall into the rut of doom scrolling, reading endless and repetitive, depressing news cycles.

You see, the Scriptures teach there's a wrestling match going on in your heart. A wrestling match between wisdom and foolishness, righteousness and evil. And you have to choose which wrestler you will feed, which one you will train, that is guarding your heart.

There's another way to look at it. Tend the garden of your heart. Tend your desires, emotions, and attitudes. Water your soul with nourishing things. Let the Son of God shine on your life. Keep your ground soft, aerated, and broken up. Weed out weeds, thorns, and thistles. Remove the rocks that inhibit growth.

Be forgiving of others, be forgiving of yourself. Guard your heart by not allowing yourself to become embittered against another person, against the government, against God. You can be angry, but don't be embittered.

One of the reasons I need the Psalms and love the Psalms is that the Psalms regularly remind us to praise the Lord. No matter how we're feeling, no matter our circumstances,

- *Let everything that hath breath praise the Lord. (Psalm 150)*

Keeping watch over our hearts with praise protects us from becoming calloused and hard-hearted, apathetic, or disenchanted. So develop the discipline of gratitude—even when you're not feeling it. That is guarding your heart. Grow thick skin and a tender heart. When your heart gets broken, let your heart become "broken open" to God's healing touch. God's love extends deep into your heart through the cracks.

I'd like to close with some words of wisdom sociologist and writer Brene Brown gives for wholehearted living. Brene Brown also is a Christian, so her wisdom is rooted not only in experience, but in the Scriptures.

- Cultivate Authenticity and let go of what people think of you.
- Cultivate Self-Compassion and let go of the need to be perfect.
- Cultivate a Resilient Spirit and let go of numbing and powerlessness.
- Cultivate Gratitude and Joy and let go of scarcity and fear of the dark.
- Cultivate Trust and Intuition and let go of the need for certainty.
- Cultivate Creativity and let go of comparison.
- Cultivate Play and Rest and let go of exhaustion.
- Cultivate Calm and Stillness and let go of chronic anxiety.
- Cultivate Meaningful Work and let go of oughts, shoulds, and musts.
- Cultivate Laughter, Song, and Dance and let go of always having to be in control.

Let wisdom, let Christ (the wisdom of God in the flesh), guard your heart so you can live wholeheartedly.

Amen.

Sermon Art: "*Human Heart Anatomy*" Watercolor by unknown Medical Student

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