

Proverbs 4:23: Keeping the heart

OUTLINE

Importance of the heart
Keeping the heart
Life and the heart

INTRODUCTION

Every one of us is two people, there is the person that we project and there is the person we are within. Peter calls this inner person, 'the hidden person of the heart' 1 Pet. 3:4. Today in this message I want to do an under the hood check. Think of a yacht sitting at anchor, we all see what is above the water line but don't think much about what is below the water line. The top of the yacht can be beautiful woods and colourful sails with well-polished finishings. The yacht can have a pool and a bar and a well kitted entertainment area. It can have a huge engine, a large cabin crew to attend to your every convenience, gourmet chefs, and the best navigation equipment. But if you don't look after the boat under the water line, it is all useless and your beautiful yacht will sink. Today I want us to take a close look under the water line and remember to do maintenance there.

As you look into your heart today how does it look? Perhaps you are fresh from the dry docks where you have been de-barnacled and water blasted to a factory newness. Perhaps you are in a good place spiritually you have recently had a spiritual spring clean and the dark corners of your heart are freshly swept. This message then will be an encouragement to keep it that way. Or maybe you are here today and you haven't seen a dry dock in ages. You have forgotten about what lies below the water line and there is the beginning of damage that is being ignored. Perhaps there are some cracks from hitting a hidden reef, some trial or calamity, or from colliding with another boat. Perhaps there is rust or rot that is setting in and your hull is paper thin and a shipwreck is on the horizon. Or worse perhaps you have sprung a leak and you are sinking. No longer is the ship in the sea but the sea is in the ship, no longer is the Christian in the world but the world has come home into your life and you are breached. Today we want to tend to this inner person of the heart and in order to do that we will be reflecting on Proverbs 4:23, 'Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life.'

So as we look at our text today we will investigate this issue under three headings, the importance of the heart, keeping the heart, life and the heart.

Importance of the heart

It is very important for us to consider the heart in our day and age. We are being encouraged to 'Just do it.' You are being called to 'Obey your thirst.' Today emotion is the new truth, follow your feelings, act out of feeling not out of thought. This is the opposite to the way the Bible calls us to live our lives. The Bible calls us to the introspective life not the instinctive life. Today you jump into bed with someone if you love them, or you redefine your gender on the basis of desires. The assumptions behind our age's thinking is that we are basically good and our emotions and feelings and desires are not liars who deceive us and mislead but can be trusted guides. This is not the way the Bible views the heart. Our verse reminds us that the heart is vulnerable, that it needs keeping. In fact 'The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?' The compass of our hearts has a bias and can lie and so it needs to be constantly serviced and debugged.

When the Bible talks about the heart it is not talking about the pump that moves blood around your body. The Bible, by the heart means your inner person. It is a description of your emotions, desires and thoughts. A person is what the condition of their heart is. As the KJV puts it Prov. 23:7, 'For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he.' If our hearts are well we will be well, if our hearts are wounded or sick our whole disposition falls with it. It is because we are what our hearts are that our secret thoughts are considered in the judgement by God. Samuel had to learn this when it came to anointing the next king after Saul and he was judging by external appearance, 1 Sam. 16:7, 'But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart."'

The heart determines all of our actions. Jesus teaches us this in Luke 6:43-45, "'For no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit,44 for each tree is known by its own fruit. For figs are not gathered from thornbushes, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush.45 The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.' Good treasure can only come from good hearts, and evil treasure comes from evil hearts. Are ways will manifest what is in our hearts, Prov. 14:14 puts it this way, 'The backslider in heart will be filled with the fruit of his ways, and a good man will be filled with the fruit of his ways.' Backsliding does not begin in our actions but in our hearts and then what is in our hearts fills our ways.

Keeping the heart

Now that we have understood the importance of the heart we must consider the exhortation of our verse, 'Keep your heart with all vigilance.' We are told to keep our hearts, this word means to guard, to protect, or it could mean to maintain. Both meanings are fitting for our case. Matthew Henry uses two pictures to convey these meanings, 'keep them as our jewel, as our vineyard.' A jewel is precious and cannot defend itself, it needs walls around it and guards to ensure that no one can get at it. A vineyard needs keeping in another way, there are many jobs that need doing to ensure that a vineyard produces fruit, cultivation is a means of keeping.

Take the meaning of keep as maintain. When we are first born again and filled with a first love, this is an ideal state that the Lord calls His people back to in Rev. 2:4-5, 'But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.5 Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.' There is a submissiveness to God's word, a tenderness towards sin, a deep hunger for God's presence in prayer, a delighting in God's people that is ours when we are first converted. We are to maintain/keep our hearts in this positive frame.

Take the second meaning protect. You and I have hearts that readily love sin, even though we love God. Paul describes this conflict in Romans 7:22-23, 'For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being,23 but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.' Your heart is fuel ready to ignite with the slightest spark. For this reason you do not underestimate your own strength, you play it safe, you keep/guard/protect your heart.

The urgency of guarding our hearts is amplified when our verse adds, 'with all vigilance.' A guard on the ramparts looking out for enemies guards with all vigilance. I hope you get this sense of urgency, this sense of life or death. One Puritan Peter Moffett puts it this way, 'Rather look to the cleansing of thine heart, than to the cleansing of thy well; rather look to the feeding of thine heart, than to the feeding of thy flock; rather look to the defending of thy heart, than to defending thy house; rather look to keeping thine heart, than to the keeping of thy money.'

We all vigilant with those things that are important to us. Some of us look after our health, others strive to keep their bodies in shape, some have an immaculate garden, some make extra efforts in kitting out their cars, some expend their energy on the interior design of their houses. These things are not wrong, but the most important thing that we tend to neglect is that which lies below the water line. We are quick to grab the stain remover when someone spills a drink on our carpets, but not to confess a sin in our hearts. We are willing to say no to a meal that is too high in carbs but not to a sinful indulgence that will wound our consciences. We fail to remember the importance of maintaining our hearts.

Keeping the heart with vigilance has a negative and a positive aspect to it, these correspond to the meanings of protect and maintain. Firstly, the negative, the protection of our hearts, the regulation of what we allow into our hearts. John Gill summarises it this way, to keep the with all diligence is to keep, 'the mind from vanity', that is don't fill your mind with things are do not bear spiritual fruit, 'the understanding from error' because error and lies can mislead us, 'the will from perverseness' the will is part of the inner man that you have to steer from evil, 'the conscience clear of guilt,' when in doubt don't, a man can die from the death of a thousand cuts and our hearts by a thousand small sins, 'the affections from being inordinate and set on evil objects,' our hearts can love wrong things and we have to stop ourselves getting emotionally invested in sin, 'thoughts from being employed on bad subjects,' spiritual warfare consists in the first place in taking thoughts captive and not allowing our minds to be the playground of sin.

The negative part where we guard our hearts involves not only stopping evil from getting a foothold in any part of our inner man but also from stopping the heart from manifesting and giving birth to sin. Keeping our hearts involves keeping a leash on our sins, our emotions, our words, our actions, and all that could potentially issue from our hearts.

Keeping our hearts is not only a case of fighting a rearguard but is also a positive thing, like cultivating a vineyard. A vineyard needs walls but walls don't make for good fruit. You need sunshine, water, fertilizer, pruning, picking and other activities. It is the same when it comes to keeping the mind in a good condition. One of the first verses I ever memorised was Ps. 119:11, 'I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you.' A W Pink puts it this way: 'to 'keep' the heart signifies to store it well with pure and holy things. As the most effective way of getting a child to willingly drop some dirty trifle is to proffer it an apple or an orange, so the best security for the soul against the allurements of satan is to have it engaged with a lovelier and more satisfying object. A heart which is filled and engaged with good is best protected against evil. Note well the order in Philippians 4:6-8, 'do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.' The heart which casts all its care upon God is well guarded from anxiety by His peace; but a pure atmosphere must be breathed if the

soul is to be kept healthy, and that is best promoted by thinking about wholesome, lovely, praiseworthy things.

Let us talk about personal devotions for a moment. There are many different techniques and programs available for Christians to use. However, all of us I know have struggled with personal devotions. We have all fallen into habit and empty routines and been left dry at the end of our devotions. I do not want to talk about the right technique but rather the right goal. We are all different so you will have to work out how you reach this goal based on all the different ways you do devotions. The key is to move the heart. As a preacher it is not my goal to simply impart information, it is my goal to present the information in such a way as to move the heart. It may be moved in joy, grief, awe, guilt, comfort, assurance, peace, etc. Going through the routine of sitting through a sermon will do you no good if the heart is not moved. Why? Because it is from the heart that the wellsprings of life flow. If the heart is flowing joyfully in grateful emotion, this will spill over into willing obedience and speed us in all of our duties. If you want to keep your heart then you are going to have to read your bible until your heart moves. I have had to stop trying to read the Bible through in a year because I found that the quantity was wasted because I was simply reading to get through it. Now I read the Bible slowly with a journal and dwell on a verse sometime for a whole week. I read until I hit upon something that opens up and I follow it until some truth is laid bare and my heart is stirred by it. It is the same with prayer, there is a time for praying through a list because people need your prayers, but you will not gladly pray and seek God's face when there is no movement of the heart. This is why I read the Bible before praying, I use Christian hymns to stimulate my heart towards devotion. I use devotional books, all because I am seeking this end, to move my heart for out of my heart my life flows.

But I think our biggest problem is the amount of distraction that we have in our lives. We will our lives will all sorts of things that stimulate our imaginations and interest that we have lost the ability to cultivate our hearts for God. We live on the manipulated emotions of Netflix, music videos, immersive gaming, constant communication and connectedness. In small doses these things are fine and even good and useful, but we are natural addicts who overdo it. We end up like the Astronaut we have spent too much time in zero gravity, all our muscles atrophy, and when we come back to normal gravity we are weak and incapable. Here is the hardest part of keeping your heart in a situation like ours, you have to sometimes say no to things that are not sinful, just to keep your heart supple and soft towards God and sensitive towards sin. Paul we know was a man who lived with a clear conscience, who was instant in prayer and perpetually driven by his zeal for God. Listen to what he says in 1 Cor. 6:12, "All things are lawful for me," but not all things are helpful. "All things are lawful for me," but I will not be enslaved by anything.' Now there is a lot going on in this verse that has to do with the false ideas floating around Corinth. But what I want you to see is how the apostle protects himself. He makes the distinction between things that are lawful and things that are helpful. Not everything that is allowed will help you keep your heart. This means that the question you often have to ask yourself is not whether a thing is sinful but whether it will help you fan your first love into a white hot zeal for God. Keeping your heart for God does not only involve keeping yourself from sin, in many ways if you are at that boundary between sin and not sin, then you lost the war a ways back. It is not merely our goal to not sin but to love God with all of our hearts. We are not seeking to orient our lives by law and pushing for the bare minimum before I go over the line into sin, no the goal is to have hearts that are carefully kept in a first love state for God.

Life and the heart

We have been talking the fact that if our heart is good then our actions will be good. Let's talk a little about what the consequences of this are in different situations.

Let's begin with a typical situation where a Christian is depressed and cast down. Listen to the psalmist in Psalm 77:3-4, 'When I remember God, I moan; when I meditate, my spirit faints. Selah. You hold my eyelids open; I am so troubled that I cannot speak.' Asaph is forlorn over the terrible situation he and the people of God are in. He is depressed because of the judgements they have suffered. The country he loves is afflicted and the signs of God's favour are absent. This is affecting him so much that he is losing sleep, and he feels incapable of speech. He then starts with the heart, v5-10, 'I consider the days of old, the years long ago. I said, "Let me remember my song in the night; let me meditate in my heart." Then my spirit made a diligent search: "Will the Lord spurn forever, and never again be favorable? Has his steadfast love forever ceased? Are his promises at an end for all time? Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has he in anger shut up his compassion?" Selah. Then I said, "I will appeal to this, to the years of the right hand of the Most High.'" You will notice in v5 that he thinks on God's past dealings, and in v6 he meditates in his heart. This is of concern to us as we are thinking about how the heart is to be kept in order to influence our lives. He thinks deeply about the past which lead him to a number of rhetorical questions in v7-9, all with the answer, No! this leads him to confident prayer where he will appeal to God for mercy on the basis of His past faithfulness to Israel. This is an example of a man who kept his heart.

Another example of a man keeping his heart is David in Psalm 34:1-9. It is often the temptation of the innocent and the persecuted to be zealous for revenge and to grudge the wicked any good. It is easy for them to be angry at God for the apparent injustice and tie themselves up in all sorts of knots. Read these verses and look at how the psalmist keeps his heart. The various verbs show us how he did this.

How is your heart today? Have you given your heart to sin and temptation? Is your heart dominated by fear and anxiety? Has your heart sunk in depression and sadness? Remember that all your life flows from the state of your heart. We are to keep our hearts, not as if our lives depend upon it but because our lives do indeed depend upon it. This involves guarding the heart as well as cultivating the heart, it involves ensuring our hearts are jump started and kept from lawful things that may hinder us. Perhaps you are here today and you are not a follower of Christ and you have been confronted for the first time with the reality of a heart that seeks sin and you know the prison that your own heart is to you and you cannot break free. God has sent His Son Jesus Christ to pay for your crimes, but that is not all, He also intends to set you free from those things that hold your heart that you heart will be free to do what it is made for—to love Him and your neighbour. You feel today that you are a slave to loving self and know the guilt you have incurred because of it. Cry out to God for His mercy, He promises to freely receive all those who come to Him, a broken and contrite heart He will not despise. He gives grace, the grace of forgiveness and freedom to those who humble themselves.