

A True Healthy Heart Program

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

—Proverbs 4:23

Our society is working hard at getting rid of heart disease, and for good reason. Heart disease accounts for about twenty-five percent of all deaths in America, and each year 600,000 Americans will die from heart disease. There may be some here who are concerned about their heart health because heart disease is in their family.

This text tells us that every Christian is commanded to maintain a true healthy heart program. We see this in three ways:

- 1) It is required by God;
- 2) It is needed by people;
- 3) It is to be applied in life.

Required by God

As we turn to Proverbs 4, it is important to recognize where our text is in the book of Proverbs. The first three chapters of Proverbs have exalted Wisdom as a divine gift and human goal, giving guidance for life and relationships. Chapter 4 contains the wise instruction of a father, followed by the cautions of chapters 5–7 against adultery and dangerous promises and laziness. It is important to sense the urgency of chapter 4—“hear, my children” (v. 1); “receive my sayings” (v. 10); “give attention to my words” (v. 20). In many ways this is the covenant Father speaking

to His covenant children—“get wisdom” (v. 5). In order to guard against sin, the Father is saying, “Follow My Word. Find Jesus, true wisdom; He has come that you may have life, and that you may have it more abundantly.”

That is why God says in our text—“keep your heart!” But what is your heart? There is often confusion about what the biblical heart is. Simply speaking, your heart is your mind, emotions, and desires. Surgery cannot see or touch this heart. It is immaterial, but it is real. All of your thoughts, discernments, decisions, plans, purposes, affections, attitudes, actions—all are fueled by and driven by your heart. So when we read in Genesis 17 that Abraham “said in his heart...,” this was something he was thinking.

The spiritual heart makes man different from the animals. Because you have a heart, you are responsible. We are commanded to love the Lord our God with all of our hearts, meaning, all of our mind, emotions, and desires. And yet, because of sin, we know that the natural man’s heart is enmity against God. It hates God. So when God looked at the world in Genesis, He saw that every thought in the heart of man was evil continually. That is why there are many warnings about the heart in the Bible: we are to avoid a double heart (Ps. 12:2), a hard heart (Prov. 28:14), a proud heart (Prov. 21:4), an unbelieving heart (Heb. 3:12), a cold heart (Matt. 24:12), and an unclean heart (Ps. 51:10).

But the Bible also reveals that the heart can be changed. To people who are truly repentant, God has promised to take the stony heart of sin away and give us a tender, working heart of flesh. Then our hearts will be willing and ready. Then through the Holy Spirit, we will have minds, wills, and desires that love and desire communion with God.

And so, as we come to our text, this is not just Solomon admonishing his son; the covenant Lord is saying, “Keep thy heart.” This passage supposes a renewed heart

through regeneration, a work of grace in the heart. This heart is a precious gift of God, and now He is saying, “My children, hear the instruction of a Father. Be attentive to these words: keep thy heart!” This is a command, an imperative. This is not an optional feature of the Christian life. You must do this.

But maybe you are thinking, what is God requiring? What does it mean to keep my heart?

First, to keep your heart begins with watching what goes on in your mind and emotions. It is reflecting on what you are doing and thinking. It is being alert to your motives. It is asking yourself, Is this right? Is this what God wants? Keeping your heart is telling yourself what Jesus said to the disciples: “Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation” (Mark 14:38).

Second, to keep your heart is to remember what God has done and shown and taught you. When Moses had to command the children of Israel after Exodus and prior to their entering the Promised Land, he told them: “Take heed to thyself, and keep thy soul diligently, lest thou forget the things which thine eyes have seen, and lest they depart from thy heart all the days of thy life” (Deut. 4:9); and “Thou shalt remember all the way which the LORD thy God led thee these forty years in the wilderness, to humble thee, and to prove thee, to know what was in thine heart, whether thou wouldest keep his commandments, or no” (Deut. 8:2). Recall what you used to want and how God delivered you and tested you (Jer. 17:9, 10).

Third, to keep your heart is to trust God and His promises more than your own thoughts, or even the thoughts of others. God is the one who sees and knows everything. So when something crosses your mind that makes you doubt or sin or have no faith, you must stop thinking those thoughts, pray, and trust. Though we have

been made new and need to live in that fullness, we need to walk obediently and in faith every day (Prov. 28:26).

Finally, to keep your heart is also to guard your heart—to preserve it, to cause it to be safe. Keep the sayings of Wisdom in the midst of your heart. “Let them not depart from thine eyes; keep them in the midst of thine heart” (v. 21). Do this by using the means of grace. Focus much of your reading on the Word of God, for He can discern the thoughts and intents of your heart.

But this keeping is not like building a fence, which you build and then leave it alone to do its job. This keeping is not just a one-time activity. Our text says it must be done “with all diligence.” “All diligence” means we must keep our heart by caring for it, giving attention to it. Proverbs 4:26 uses the word “ponder” to describe a similar activity. It just means to stop and think about it. Take your spiritual pulse. “Take heed to yourselves, that your heart be not deceived, and ye turn aside, and serve other gods, and worship them” (Deut. 11:16).

“All diligence” means we must also keep our heart by disciplining it. Not in the sense of punishment, but in the sense of hedging to keep danger out. Like someone in a healthy heart program, it means being strict with your diet. Be consistent and firm with yourself and boundaries. “Do not let God’s sayings depart from your eyes” (v. 21); “Put away from you...look straight ahead” (v. 24); “Turn not to the right or to the left” (v. 27). “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Matt. 6:21). If wisdom is your treasure, there will your heart be also.

“All diligence” also means we must also keep our heart by giving it priority. Physically, your heart matters more than your toenails. In the original, the phrase translated “with all diligence” actually comes first in the text. It could be translated, “More than all guarding, guard your heart!” Above everything else, guard your heart.

The Bible does tell us to keep our eyes (Job 31:1), keep our tongues (Ps. 34:13), keep our feet (Eccl. 5:1), but here it commands us to, above all else, keep our hearts.¹

We often spend energy on guarding, protecting, and disciplining our children, our money and budgets, our schedules, our diets and exercise routines, our rules and procedures. But are we guarding and disciplining our own hearts? Our minds, wills, and desires? How can we do this? My friends, we cannot depend on our efforts at discipline. We are absolutely dependent on God's grace and gifts to us. But while the power to do this is from God, the duty to do it is ours. As one Puritan said, "Though to keep the heart be God's work, our efforts are his instrumentality."² As Christians, we are to be faithful stewards of what we have been given. If you are a believer, God has given you a new heart; guard it! Guarding your heart brings glory to God. This is for Him, His honor, and His glory. Are you guarding your heart, your mind and emotions, for the honor of God?

This command to keep your heart is also a calling to unbelievers. You cannot keep the heart you have; you cannot protect the life in your heart because it is still dead. You need a heart transplant. Your cry cannot be for grace to keep your heart; it needs to be for grace to enliven your heart and for the heavenly Physician to do heart-replacement surgery in you. And yet the wise words of Solomon and the greater-than-Solomon speak to you: Pay attention to your heart. If you truly observe your mind and thoughts and take record of your words, you will see that you are living in hatred against God and His commandments. Guarding your heart will keep you from growing harder yet.

1. Matthew Henry, *Commentary*, Prov. 4:20–27.

2. Charles Bridges, Quoted in W. Harris, *Proverbs*, The Preacher's Complete Homiletic Commentary (Toronto: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1892), 65.

This command also speaks to those who think they are set because they come to church, dress properly, read good books, and don't say bad words. But God does not want your self-righteous activities; He wants your heart. The outside of your body can be decked out beautifully, but God wants the heart. Jesus Himself dismissed the well-clothed Pharisees by saying, "This people honoureth me with their lips, but their heart is far from me" (Mark 7:6).

Christ Himself said, "If you love me, keep my commandments." "My son, my daughter, if you love Me, keep My command to guard your heart!" Why?

Needed by People

Our text continues: "...for out of it are the issues of life." This is true physically as well. Because our heart pumps blood throughout the body, we can move and think. Our heart valves and arteries and veins keep the blood going where it needs to be. If the heart is healthy, the benefit is felt in the extremities of the body; if it is diseased, the whole physical frame suffers.³ But what does it mean spiritually that out of the heart flow the issues of life?

It does not mean that if we guard our heart and do not do this or that then we will be better people. It does not guarantee that you will have more prosperity than your neighbor down the street. It does not mean that you will be blessed with children and a strong family. Keeping our hearts does not earn us salvation, or even favor in God's eyes. The new birth is all a work of grace—unmerited favor because of what Christ has done. But once we have been given that new heart, our greatest desire and struggle becomes keeping the heart close to God.

When our text says that the issues of life flow out of the heart, it means that our heart is the source of our behavior and decisions. It's like a fountain: what comes up

3. W. Harris, *Proverbs*, 63.

from inside is what bubbles out. “For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh. A good man out of the good treasure of the heart bringeth forth good things: and an evil man out of the evil treasure bringeth forth evil things” (Matt. 12:34–35). Look at the next few verses in Proverbs 4: we are told to put away a deceitful mouth, fix our eyes, and watch the path of our feet. So often, what our heart loves, our ears will hear and eyes see. Consider how your children can always seem to find the particular ice-cream shop or toy store they like. Our hearts are the source of our behavior.

Second, we need to keep our heart, because it is the direction of behavior and experiences. Positively, this can be seen in Deuteronomy 30 where Moses is instructing the people, “If you obey,...the LORD thy God will circumcise thine heart, and the heart of thy seed, to love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, that thou mayest live.” Your guarded heart will lead to life. This was also true for Solomon; his prayer was for an understanding heart to judge God’s people and discern between good and bad—and he was given more wisdom than all before him (1 Kings 3). But it is also true in the reverse. Like Rehoboam, if you do not give your heart to seek the Lord, you will live a life of evil.

When asked why we did something, a common answer is, “I never thought about it.” We really mean that we did it but never stopped to reflect on what it meant. That is why people need to guard their heart. It helps us reflect on the direction of our lives.

Third, we need to keep our hearts because it brings the benefits of behavior and experiences. If you had heart disease and followed your doctor’s orders, it would enable you to do more, see more, and humanly speaking even live longer. Guarding your heart does bring benefits. A

godly heart produces godly living. As John Flavel has said, “What health is to the heart, holiness is to the soul.”⁴

Keeping your heart will humble you because of the evil that is still in your heart. It will bring you to earnest prayer and supplication: “Cleanse thou me from secret faults, Lord!” Maybe you’re struggling and wrestle with the thoughts of your heart, and you are afraid to say, “I love the Lord” because you still feel so much sin in your heart. My friend, that is the struggle of faith, and that is why this command comes to keep your heart, so that you will see more clearly and be more assured of His love to you. Matthew Henry says, “We must maintain a holy jealousy of ourselves, and set a strict guard, accordingly, upon all the avenues of the soul.”⁵

Guarding your heart will confirm and reinforce faithful communion with God and help us to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. Keeping your heart brings assurance, as God will never reward spiritual laziness.⁶ Guarding your mind and emotions brings spiritual fruitfulness. It will guard you from sin and temptation, and give greater focus and joy in your Savior. It will increase your love. It will strengthen your faith. It will encourage you to persevere. Serving Him with all your heart will help you remember what great things He has done for you (1 Sam. 12:24).

Fourth, when you keep your heart, it also witnesses Christian character and behavior. It keeps from real hypocrisy. It makes your conversation sparkle with spiritual beauty. Guarding your heart also preserves the integrity of your Christian witness.

You cannot eat only processed and greasy foods every day and expect your physical heart to keep working

4. Flavel, *Keep Thy Heart*, 14.

5. Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible*, (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), Prov. 4:20–27.

6. Flavel, *Keep Thy Heart*, 32.

properly. You should not say your spiritual heart is working properly either if you allow all manner of junk into it. What are you letting in your eye-gates and ear-gates and imagination that is tearing your defenses down? No one wants to suffer from spiritual arrhythmia: “Our lives will be regular or irregular, comfortable or uncomfortable, according as our hearts are kept or neglected.”⁷ The comfort of your soul, and blessing to the rest of your spiritual body, depends on it. If we neglect our hearts, our hearts grow cold and distant and our love, patience, joy, kindness, gentleness, and self-control seem to shrivel.

So my friend, if you are struggling and confess it is dark and confused, you need to ask yourself—have I guarded my heart? Have I protected the source and well-spring of my spiritual life? It may be that you have let enemies into your heart. It may be that your spiritual arteries are clogged with the cares of this world. The Word comes to you tonight: “Keep thy heart with all diligence.” This is a command that leads to self-examination—not before men, but before God. Are you keeping your heart?

Applied to Life

Reading about the necessity and benefits of a healthy heart program is not enough; you need to do what the program dictates. Likewise, this spiritually healthy heart program is one that is applicable for every Christian, in all times of life. However, there are particular times when guarding your heart is even more necessary. I want to briefly address seven of these times.

First, guarding your heart is especially necessary in times of prosperity and success. It is necessary because our success tends to blind us to our real condition and temptations. So when you have a good report card, guard your heart. When your bonus comes in, guard your heart.

7. Henry, *Commentary*, Prov. 4:20–27.

Remember, earthly things clog the way to heaven; there are temptations of pride and self-reliance that come with prosperity and good numbers. God does not judge people by their prosperity, but by their heart.

Second, guarding your heart is especially necessary in times of adversity. When something we think of as bad happens, our hearts tend to question God, wonder and doubt, and assume things.

When you get a poor health report or are in an accident or lose a friendship or lose your income, remember God's providence; He has ordained it. He did not choose you because you were doing well. He will not reject you because you are experiencing adversity. Remember how Jesus, after His resurrection, appeared to the eleven and rebuked them for their unbelief and hardness of heart because they did not believe and were so focused on their perceived trial. Your wandering heart hurts you more than God's affliction on you.

Third, guarding your heart is especially necessary in times of want. When our resources run low, we often distrust the fountain of all good. This is true financially and materially. It is true emotionally and physically. It is also true spiritually. Remember that many of God's children have had very little materially. In the big picture, missing some earthly comforts is better than missing Christ; this want is nothing compared to the want of any grace in eternity. Also, remember that God the Father is willing and able to provide everything you need for soul and body. Guard your heart against thinking otherwise.

Fourthly, guard your heart especially when Satan appears and tempts. Remember that one of Satan's greatest strengths is his subtlety. He will come to you where you least expect him. He will tell you that you deserve this pleasure; he will tell you this can be done in secret; he will tell you other Christians have done this. Guard your

heart by remembering that Satan wants to destroy you and have you defame your Lord. But also remember that Jesus Himself was tempted by Satan and had to rebuke and resist Satan through Scripture. Recall Scripture to evaluate your thoughts and motives.

Fifthly, guard your heart by committing to not be like the world, and by seeing recreation as from God and for God. Satan often allures in times of rest. You have all heard the phrase “Idle hands are the devil’s tools.” There is an element of truth in that not just for society, but also for God’s children. Satan wants you to think that the rules change when you have “down time.”

This is not a command to be busy all the time. But, as you go on vacation, as you spend extra time with friends, as you relax—guard your heart. Guard your heart by committing to not be like the world and to not see recreation as from God and for God. On vacation, read your Bible, pray, do devotions, have family worship. When socializing, remember that everything you have and are is from God. As you relax, remember you are to love the Lord your God with all of your mental, spiritual, and physical energy. God never says, “Take the summers off.”

Sixth, guarding your heart is more necessary in times of drawing close to God. You may think that is strange. But consider two scenarios: First, you need to guard your heart when seeking God. Scripture says many times to seek Him with all your heart. Never dismiss convictions. Second, consider how hard it is to stay focused in prayer and meditation. Even when in prayer in times of need, your mind and emotions tend to get distracted by other things.

Guard your heart by setting time apart; by speaking your prayers quietly; by singing; by giving yourself a space where other things will not distract your eyes, your ears, or even your nose. Remember that when you come before Him, you are approaching the Holy Lord. Guard your heart.

Seventhly, guarding your heart is especially necessary in times of approaching death. Satan often makes final attacks against those ready to cross into glory. He wants you to fear and doubt, and forget the promise, “When you pass through the waters I will be with you, and the rivers will not overflow you” (Isa. 43:2). Dear saints, guard your heart by recalling how death is harmless to God’s people; it is necessary to meet your Creator and Redeemer; the happiness of heaven begins immediately after death; the things of earth are no reason to stay behind. What did Jesus say to the disciples? “Let not your heart be troubled...I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also” (John 14:1–3).

Doesn’t that bring us to where we need to be? We need to keep our hearts. But no one ever says they’ve achieved it. If we know our hearts, we all need the Keeper of our Hearts, too. We need Jesus for new hearts. We need Jesus for the grace to persevere. We need Jesus for the grace of discernment. We need Jesus for strength to fight the Devil. We need the Lord to bless us in prosperity. We need our King to protect us in adversity. We need the water of life to supply our needs. We need the Word of God to resist temptation. We need the Savior to supply our rest. We need our heavenly Intercessor as we draw close to Him. We need our Resurrected Redeemer as we approach death. We need Him.

Society says we can preserve and strengthen our own lives through a healthy heart program. According to the doctors the rules are simple: get plenty of exercise, have a good and balanced diet, and keep your heart free of drugs and other substances. And we need to do those things.

But God’s Word tonight says we need a heavenly Physician. Only He can provide that healthy heart. His grace preserves that healthy heart. Our heart needs to

be exercised under His care, be supported by a good diet of His Word, and be free from harmful, sinful influences. “Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God” (Matt. 5:8). Therefore, my friends, “keep your heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life.” May God bless His Word. Amen.