**Life With Integrity: Guarding Your Heart**

**Proverbs 4:20-26  New King James Version**

20 My son, give attention to my words; Incline your ear to my sayings.

21 Do not let them depart from your eyes; Keep them in the midst of your heart;

22 For they are life to those who find them, And health to all their flesh.

23 Keep your heart with all diligence, For out of it spring the issues of life.

24 Put away from you a deceitful mouth, And put perverse lips far from you.

25 Let your eyes look straight ahead, And your eyelids look right before you.

26 Ponder the path of your feet, And let all your ways be established.

**Proverbs 4:20-27 The Message**

20-22 Dear friend, listen well to my words; tune your ears to my voice.

Keep my message in plain view at all times. Concentrate! Learn it by heart!

Those who discover these words live, really live; body and soul, they’re bursting with health. 23-27 Keep vigilant watch over your heart; that’s where life starts.

Don’t talk out of both sides of your mouth; avoid careless banter, white lies, and gossip. Keep your eyes straight ahead; ignore all sideshow distractions.

Watch your step, and the road will stretch out smooth before you.

Look neither right nor left; leave evil in the dust.

**Proverbs 4:20-26 Amplified Bible**

20 My son, pay attention to my words and be willing to learn; Open your ears to my sayings. 21 Do not let them escape from your sight; Keep them in the center of your heart. 22 For they are life to those who find them, And healing and health to all their flesh. 23 Watch over your heart with all diligence, For from it flow the springs of life. 24 Put away from you a deceitful (lying, misleading) mouth, And put devious lips far from you. 25 Let your eyes look directly ahead [toward the path of moral courage]  And let your gaze be fixed straight in front of you [toward the path of integrity]. 26 Consider well and watch carefully the path of your feet, And all your ways will be steadfast and sure.

**Importance In Guarding Your Heart**

This is necessary for at least three reasons:

**1. Because your heart is extremely valuable.**

* We don’t guard worthless things.
* I take my garbage to the street every Wednesday night. It is picked up on Thursday morning.
* It sits on the sidewalk all night, completely unguarded. Why? Because it is worthless.
* Not so with your heart:
	+ It is the essence of who you are.
	+ It is your authentic self—the core of your being.
	+ It is where all your dreams, your desires, and your passions live.
	+ It is that part of you that connects with God and other people.

Just like your physical body, if your heart—your spiritual heart—dies, your leadership dies. This is why Solomon says, “Above all else.” He doesn’t say, “If you get around to it” or “It would be nice if.” No, he says, make it your top priority.

**2. Because your heart is the source of everything you do.**

* King Solomon says it is the “wellspring of life.”
* In other words, it is the source of everything else in your life.
* Your heart overflows into thoughts, words, and actions.
* Everything depends on the condition of the spring:
	+ If you plug up the spring, you stop the flow of water.
	+ If you poison the water, the flow becomes toxic.
	+ In either situation, you threaten life downstream.

Likewise, if your heart is unhealthy, it has an impact on everything else. It threatens your family, your friends, your ministry, your career, and, indeed, your legacy. It is, therefore, imperative that you guard it.

**3. Because your heart is under constant attack.**

* When Solomon says to guard your heart, he implies that you are living in a combat zone—one in which there are casualties.
* Many of us are oblivious to the reality of this war.
* We have an enemy who is bent on our destruction.
* He not only opposes God, but he opposes everything that is aligned with Him—including us.

**3 Things to guard our heart against:**

* A rebellious spirit and cultivating a spirit of submissive obedience to God’s Word
* A complaining spirit and cultivating a spirit of gratitude and trust
* Anger, pride, and temptation

**Four principles of guarding our heart:**

**1. Recognize the treasure**

* Two phrases jump off the page when reading this passage, "above all else" and "wellspring of life."
* "Above all else" communicates priority, and "wellspring of life" communicates a glorious promise.
* We can only die to self when we guard our heart

**2. Prioritize the task**

* Often we make the false assumption that taking care of the heart is a selfish pursuit.
* Most of us could testify of an experience where someone used the lame excuse of selfishness to justify an ungodly decision.
* Striving for moral purity is an admirable and necessary part of following Christ.
* Guarding is more than protection; it includes pursuing and providing.

The Japanese eat little fat and suffer fewer heart problems than Americans or the British. The French eat a lot of fat and suffer fewer heart attacks than the U.S. or Britain. The Italians drink a lot of red wine and have a lower risk of heart problems than their western neighbors. What can we conclude from these facts? You can eat whatever you want, but speaking English will kill you!

* Guarding your heart is more about feeding your soul than avoiding sin.
* When our heart is strong, we are able to resist the temptations that cause many saints to stumble.
* The book of Proverbs identifies some things to avoid, but it also contains numerous instructions to pursue wisdom, grace, discipline, and life.

**3. Minimize the trash**

* Guarding your heart includes seeking God, but we cannot ignore the instruction to minimize the trash from our lives.
* The verses that follow the command to guard our heart describe putting away perverse speech, looking straight ahead, and choosing good paths.
* These verses are similar to the New Testament challenge contained in Hebrews 12:1-2: "Therefore since we also have such a large cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us lay aside every weight and the sin that so easily entangles us, and run with endurance the race that lies before us, keeping our eyes on Jesus, the source and perfecter of our faith."
* Some trash is easy to identify.
	+ Moral corruption, perverse behavior, and evil acts that harm others stand in bold opposition to God's will for your life.
* Other trash is more difficult to discern and to remove.
	+ A lack of faith, unwillingness to forgive, materialism, pride, and false belief systems can stop the flow of the "wellsprings of life" just like the easily identified sins.
* Trash, big or small, is still trash. We should embrace the challenge that the apostle Paul gave Timothy to purify himself so that he would be a "special instrument, set apart, useful to the Master, prepared for every good work" (2 Tim. 2:24).

**4. Energize with truth**

* A fourth strategy for guarding your heart is to energize with truth.
* Note the instruction "pay attention and listen closely" (Pr. 4:20).
* This emphasis to give careful attention to divine truth is followed by the promise of life and health.
* We need truth. Jesus said the truth would set us free. Solomon exhorts his son to discern and hold the instruction close to his heart.
* We live in a world that is often opposed to truth. Our culture promotes tolerance over truth, but the wise king reminds us that there is a difference between right and wrong, good and bad, righteousness and evil.
* Level paths that have a solid foundation lead to success, but evil and unstable choices will lead to destruction.
* We must also appreciate the difference between facts and truth.
* It is not enough just to know facts about the faith.
* Facts provide information, but truth produces transformation.
* Guarding your heart involves energizing your life with the transforming truth of God's love and His Word.
* Never treat the Scripture as a collection of facts.
* Pay attention and listen closely because God's Word is alive. It is sharper than a two edged sword.

**Conclusion**

* Guarding your heart is critical to experiencing all that God desires for your life. When we **Recognize the Treasure, Prioritize the Task, Minimize the Trash, and Energize with Truth, we place ourselves in a position to receive the blessings of God.**
* Nuclear submarines consist of some of the most amazing technology on the planet. These incredible military vessels can stay underwater for ninety days, but every ninety days the submarine must resurface to maintain proper alignment with the North Star. While underwater, the submarine's navigational system is affected by the earth's magnetic forces. Because these submarines carry missiles of mass destruction, they must pay close attention to keeping the navigational equipment aligned to the true reference point of the North Star.
* The nuclear submarine provides an excellent picture of our heart. Just as the submarine may have enough physical provisions like food, water, or fuel to survive, it cannot perform at its highest level or complete its mission without maintaining proper alignment with the true reference point.
* Your heart is the navigational equipment of your life. It must stay aligned with God. By guarding your heart, you stay locked on to God's will and the "wellsprings of life."

**Water Company Illustration**

Spurgeon takes this image and likens the heart to a reservoir that is the source of water for a city. The water company has a duty to provide clean, drinkable water to the people. They must guard the source.

**To give us a pure supply, the water company must first, tap into a pure source, second, they must take care what flows in, and third, they must test what flows out. This too is how we must guard our hearts, the wellspring of our lives.**

**1. Tap into a pure source**

* So, first, we need to start with something worth guarding. We need to tap into a pure source. The water company will have big problems if all it has is a reservoir polluted with chemical waste, disease, or sewage, or pesticides.
* Likewise, if our hearts, the wellsprings of our lives, are polluted, then we have no hope of living a good life.
* The story of the Israelites at Marah in Exodus 15 God's people had just escaped from Egypt and gone into the desert. But for three days they couldn't find any water. They were thirsty and desperate. Eventually they did find water at Marah, but it was bitter and undrinkable. So Moses cried out to God, and God told him to throw a certain piece of wood into the water. After that it became sweet and drinkable. The polluted water became pure.
* This is a picture for us. There is only one way to purify the wellspring of water at the heart of our lives: we need to take the wooden cross of Jesus and place it in our hearts. Nothing else will do it. This is the only way the springs of our heart can be pure.
* Jesus says, probably referring to our verse in Proverbs, Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.
* If we want to have hearts worth guarding, then we need first to come to Jesus. We need to tap into a pure source. We need to drink the water that he offers, which will become in us a spring of water welling up to eternal life.

**2. Take care what flows in**

* Let's look at verses 20 to 22 of chapter 4, where the message is, take care what flows in. Guard your heart: take care what flows into it.
* My son, pay attention to what I say; listen closely to my words. Do not let them out of your sight, keep them within your heart; for they are life to those who find them and health to a man's whole body.
* The writer is pleading with us to pay attention to his words. "Fix your ears on my words; fix your eyes on my words; take my words into your heart".
* What we pay attention to, where we fix our ears and our eyes, governs what flows into the reservoir that is our heart.
* It's very simple. If you want a heart full of pollution and poison, then fix your attention on what the world considers significant.
* Use your eyes to watch the same junk that the world watches. Use your ears to listen to the same nonsense the world listens to. Just suck up the toxic waste that surrounds us every day: the lads mags, the gossip mags, the endless soap operas, the late night TV, empty and godless novels... there really is no shortage of pollution out there.
* But if you want a heart that is good, a wellspring of life, then you need to take care what flows into it.
* We need to pay attention our Father's word: we need to listen closely to it, we need to fix our eyes on it. Above all, we need to let it flow into our hearts.
* Sometimes it's as if our hearts have a dam around them, so that, although we do spend time hearing and reading the word, it never quite manages to flow into the reservoir. God's word is constantly diverted around the outside.
* Proverbs is clear, as is the rest of the Bible: we need to keep God's words in our heart, at the core of our being. Let them penetrate to the centre. Let them fill up the spring of life in you.

Actually, Solomon would have done well to take his own advice. In First Kings we read this — listen to what happened when Solomon failed to guard his heart, — As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was not fully devoted to the Lord his God, as the heart of David his father had been... So Solomon did evil in the eyes of the Lord; he did not follow the Lord completely, as David his father had done... The Lord became angry with Solomon because his heart had turned away from the Lord, the God of Israel...

Solomon allowed his heart to be turned because he failed to take care of what flowed into it. He listened to nonsense about other gods and began to believe it when he should have devoted himself to the word of the Lord.

**3. Test what flows out**

* So, we've tapped into a pure source, and we're taking care of what flows in. The third thing we need to do is to test what flows out of our hearts.
* I can only know the true state of my heart if I examine myself, if I test what comes out of it.
* Verse 22 says that God's words are life to those who find them and health to a man's whole body.
* If we check our bodies and find that they are not full of spiritual life and health, then we know that something is wrong with our hearts.

This is what we see in verses 24 to 27. The writer considers some parts of the body: the mouth, the eyes, the feet.

* Put away perversity from your mouth; keep corrupt talk far from your lips.
* Let your eyes look straight ahead, fix your gaze directly before you.
* Make level paths for your feet and take only ways that are firm.
* Do not swerve to the right or the left; keep your foot from evil.ref

Here is a picture of a body full of life and health:

* lips that speak wholesomely, a gaze fixed on God, feet that don't lead me astray.
* All these are an expression of the state of the heart.
* If I find myself saying things that are unhelpful and ungodly — things that are hurtful to others, or self-promoting, or argumentative, or unclean — then I know where the problem is. It's not with my mouth, it's with my heart.
* Jesus said, out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him.
* Similarly, if I've got wandering eyes — eyes that covet the glittering things that the world thinks are valuable; eyes that want to look lustfully; eyes that won't stay fixed on Jesus — then I know where the problem is. It's not with my eyes, it's with my heart.
* Again, if I find my feet leading me onto foolish paths through life, then the problem is not with my feet, it's with my heart.
* Listen to Jesus again, from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man 'unclean.'ref

**Questions:**

* When did you last examine your life?
* When did you last test the quality of what flows from your heart?
* What do you think you will find if you do it today?
* And what can we do when we find, inevitably, that our hearts fail the test? What can we do if we find that our hearts are pumping pollution around our bodies; that the wellspring has become foul water? What can we do?
* Well, we've come full circle. There's no point fiddling with the plumbing.
* The only way to have a pure spring is to tap into a pure source.
* When we diagnose pollution in our hearts, all we can do is cast the cross of Jesus into them once again.
* We need to come to Jesus, and say, Lord, forgive me. My heart is bad, and I'm so sorry.
* I long for it to be good, but there's nothing I can do to make it good. I need you.
* Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.ref

**Conclusion**

* Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life.ref — this is the most important Proverb. We must make it our top priority.
* Have you tapped into a pure source of water? There is only one — only Jesus can give you water to drink that will become in you a spring of water welling up to eternal life.
* Are you taking care of what flows into your heart? Where will you fix your attention, your eyes and your ears this week?
* And are you testing what flows out of your heart? Is it good? If not, then go back to step one. Every day we need our hearts to be made pure by the precious cross of Jesus.
* Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life.