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Proverbs 4:20-27

Third Message

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## THE ISSUE OF THE HEART

The heart is truly a wonder. It beats more than a hundred thousand times a day, pumping oxygen and nutrition through sixty thousand miles of arteries, veins and capillaries. The health of the whole body depends on the heart. It is strategically protected beneath the surface, and is central to our lives.

The condition of our hearts is of great importance to us, and it should be. We spend a great deal of time and money exercising to get our heart rate up, eating less fatty foods, etc. We are preoccupied with exercise and diet. We look at the heart symbols next to menu items. My wife has convinced me of the benefits of tofu, something I never thought possible. I found myself even ordering a tofu enchilada in a restaurant lately.

The Bible teaches there is a spiritual heart too. It too is central and interior to our being, critical to our life as God intended it to be lived, and is always active, receiving and distributing what we feed it. Our spiritual heart is the part that causes us to act the way we do. Our words, attitudes, and actions flow from it.

To care for our spiritual heart, we must understand some things about it.

The heart is the richest term in the Bible for the totality of man's inner nature. It is the deepest core of our being which animates the rest of the body. It is the source of what makes us truly alive: our soul, emotions, longings, ambitions, thoughts, beliefs, and will.

We use this term the same way today. We refer to a deep longing as something we "set our hearts on." And a person who has character has a "good heart."

But, the natural heart apart from God's regenerate touch can be devious. It has the tendency to wander and lead us away from what is good for us. In fact, Jeremiah says the heart is "deceitful above all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?" (Jer 17:9-10).

But then, as we read in David's response to his sin, in Psalm 51, God is pleased with a "broken and contrite heart." Spiritually speaking, we actually need a heart transplant. We all need heart transplants, but often we settle merely for reforming the parts of the old one. We attempt remodeling instead of gutting it like we know it needs. David says "create in me a clean heart." Create, here, means to bring something new out of nothing, like God did in creation.

So it's reasonable to ask, What is the condition of our spiritual heart? What are our vital signs? Today, our passage from the book of Proverbs is a spiritual heart examination, by the Great Physician. But, it is open book examination, so let's read together. Proverbs 4:20-27:

**My son, give attention to my words;  
Incline your ear to my sayings.  
Do not let them depart from your sight;  
Keep them in the midst of your heart.  
For they are life to those who find them,**

**And health to all their whole body.  
Watch over your heart with all diligence,  
For from it flow the springs of life.  
Put away from you a deceitful mouth,  
And put devious lips far from you.  
Let your eyes look directly ahead,  
And let your gaze be fixed straight in front of you.  
Watch the path of your feet,  
And your ways will be established.  
Do not turn to the right nor to the left;  
Turn your foot from evil. (Prov 4:20-27 NASB)**

Notice the metaphor throughout is members of the body. Ear, eyes, heart, whole body, heart, mouth, lips, eyes, eyelids, feet, and foot are mentioned, top to bottom, each with different functions. Members that receive information are mentioned in verses 20-22. The heart is the ultimate receptacle (verse 23), but like the physical heart, it passes through and recirculates what came in. Then out of the heart, active members are mentioned (verses 24-27). But the heart is at the center of the passage, literally and in importance of meaning.

So how do we go about improving the condition of our hearts?

There are two parts to this father's test. He tells us to examine two pathways: what's going in and what's going out of the heart.

Let us examine the quality of the inflow. Verses 20-23:

**My son, give attention to my words;  
Incline your ear to my sayings.  
Do not let them depart from your sight;  
Keep them in the midst of your heart.  
For they are life to those who find them,  
And health to all their whole body.  
Watch over your heart with all diligence,  
For from it flow the springs of life. (4:20-23)**

The emphasis here is what's going inside. What are the ways we ingest into the spiritual heart?

First, be attentive, bend your ear toward God's wisdom. What do we listen to? Gossip? Endless talk radio? There are a lot more big talkers in the world than good listeners. Have you noticed that? We can be attentive to God rather than just talking about God all the time.

And second, fix your eyes upon that which is good. What do you look at? The gate of the eyes can receive truth and beauty or it can take in harmful material. Jesus said, "the lamp of the body Is the eye; if therefore your eye is clear (healthy), your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness." He was talking about the pathway to the heart too, because he just said in the verse preceding this, "where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."

We need to keep the pathway to the heart unhindered. The health of the whole body depends on the quality of what we ingest into our body and gets absorbed into the blood stream and then distributed by the heart. The heart is a pass-through mechanism and doesn't discriminate between nutrients and toxins. Harmful things get circulated as well.

Take the entertainment industry, which floods our homes and lives. It's amazing what's at our disposal for entertainment these days, videos, music, television, games, movies, etc., and the money we spend on it. It's been my observation that generally we are indiscriminate with videos and movies. The only questions we ask are, "Is it sold out?" or, "Who can I go with?" I'm not going to try to set a specific standard, but why not use the test: What will it do to my heart?

Finally, God's Word flows to the center of the heart where it will provide life for the whole body. What is the center of your life? What informs you at the core?

Perhaps some of you know about the Delaney sisters, Sadie and Bessie. They have shared their story and wisdom about life in a couple of books recently. They are worth listening to, because they are about 108 and 106 years old. I think the Lord took one of them home recently. They are from a family of ten children and parents who were slaves.

Talking about their time growing up, they said:

Papa kept the Bible in his study, and we'd get a reading from it every night before we went to sleep. Papa always handled the Bible very carefully. He used to tell us never to put anything on top of it, not even a piece of paper. It was sacred. That Bible—the Word of God—was the center of our home, and you know, we still have it. We keep it in the living room, on a special small table between the two chairs where we spend most of our time. The Bible is where we go for guidance. God's wisdom is at work in the words, but you can also get plenty of practical advice in the Bible. After all, mankind hasn't changed that much. [*Book of Everyday Wisdom*]

Is God's Word central to your life, your home? Often you see entertainment centers being the center. The wise son, then, is diligent to feed the heart spiritually.

Why? Because there are benefits. Verse 22:

**For they are life to those who find them,  
And health to all their whole body. (4:22)**

The benefits are, life, and healing to the whole body. The Word of God affects the whole quality of our life and our health. It is medication for the whole of life.

Verse 23 is the center-line of this passage. Without this understanding, the rest won't make any sense. The father has an exhortation: Guard the heart above all else.

**Watch over your heart with all diligence. (4:23a)**

Literally, it reads, "in all your watching over, watch over your heart." Or, above all other concerns for guarding things, guard your heart. It is very similar language to 4:7, about acquiring wisdom: "in all your acquiring, acquire wisdom."

What do you spend time protecting and guarding? Your house, lifestyle, family, money? Psalm 127 says, "unless the Lord guards the city, the watchmen stay awake in vain."

The way you watch reflects the importance of the heart. Apply all diligence. Constant vigilance is required. If we are energized to guard any area of our lives, it should be this.

So, the heart is to be guarded vigorously. Life becomes very focused and simple when there is a physical crisis in our lives. The same should be true with our spiritual heart. Don't be careless with the thing that provides life to your whole body.

The reason follows:

**For from it flow the springs of life. (4:23b)**

The heart is the source (spring) of life. Some translations say "wellspring." Literally, it is the "goings out," or outflow of life, like a freshwater spring.

The heart is vital to bring life, much like water. In Israel, springs of water are of utmost importance. Cities were built for proximity to a water source. Battles were fought over water (as they are here in California as well!). Most stream beds in Israel are only seasonal and dry up, but when a consistent spring is found, it is life indeed.

King Hezekiah knew how important a source of spring water was, especially during a time when enemies threatened God's people in Jerusalem. The Assyrian armies under Sennacherib were decimating any cities in their path coming down from the north. Jerusalem was on his hit list. He not only would plunder the city but would bring his style of worship of idols back to the temple where God alone was to be worshipped. Hezekiah had already spent most of his kingship ridding Israel of all its unprecedented number of other gods that came in under King Ahaz.

Under this pressure, Hezekiah built an eighteen hundred-foot tunnel through solid rock from the Gihon spring to the pool of Siloam inside the city walls. You can walk through this marvel of engineering today. Do you know how hard that was to build? From inside, you can see the hand chisel marks. It was all because they needed to guard above all else what was precious to God, the Temple, the place where God resided. But it didn't matter how many fortified walls he had around Jerusalem, if Hezekiah didn't have a source of water. And a constant flow of it. He even blocked off other sources of water so the enemy couldn't be refreshed! He was diligent!

We are to treat our heart, which is God's residence within us, this way to combat the siege of enemies on every side. Do we protect our source of life this tenaciously?

And what is our source or spring that provides life giving water to satisfy our thirst?

The source of never ending spring water is Christ. Remember his words to the woman at the well: "whoever drinks of the water I give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life" (Jn.4:14). This is the same idea. Jesus was speaking of living water. If she were to drink the kind of water he was offering, she would never be thirsty again. If Christ resides in our hearts, he is that living water. And, unlike the wells that we seek after that soon dry up, that Source, residing in our hearts, will never dry up.

The second pathway the father would have us to examine is, what goes out of the heart. The emphasis here is on the outside. The acting members of the body are affected by what issues forth from the heart.

We should examine the outflow from our hearts, the fruits that are produced in our lives. In verses 24-27, we are told of three areas

where we can see evidence for whether we have a fountain flowing through our hearts or whether they are processing toxins.

First, our speech, what we say. The words of James (3:5-12) say that the controlling of our words is an evidence of the purity of the "fountain" which bubbles forth from within. Do our words build up or tear down? Our speech is evidence of what is in our hearts.

Secondly, our vision, what we see. Our eyes must look straight ahead, neither to left nor right. When my son rides his bike, he has a habit of looking around at me riding behind. I have visions of him riding into a light pole (and he has on occasion). If our vision is directed straight ahead, it will guide our path.

And thirdly, our path, where we go. Keep your feet on the well-worn track. The problems come only when you get off the road. Ephesians 5:15 says be careful how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise.

Do you like what's bubbling up out of your life? Do your words build up or tear down?

Is your vision keeping you on track?

How about your path? Where are your feet leading you?

In chapter 4 of Proverbs over the last three weeks we have heard the father share three basic ideas: seek wisdom above all else; choose the way of wisdom; and now, guard your heart above all else. Christ fulfills each one of these in our lives, because he has become our Wisdom, the Way, and now our Source of living water.

What flows into the heart, flows out of the heart. The issue is the heart. And what issues from the heart is critical.

We need a new source of water before we go back to the same old well; otherwise we will get thirsty again. Remember the response of the woman at the well: "give me this water, so I will not be thirsty, and not come all the way here to draw."

Is that our response too? Give me this water, Lord, so I don't keep seeking it from wells which dry up. Or, perhaps we need a change at the source and not make another trip to the dry well.

Do you have vital signs? Do you need a new heart?

Do you desire to have a source in life to never thirst again?

What are you feeding your heart? What is landing in your heart on a consistent basis?

Let's come before the Lord, accepting his examination.

**Search me, O God, and know my heart. (Ps 139:23-4)**

Let God, the great Physician, heal you and revive your heart, for from it flow the springs of life.

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