

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 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 speech 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 all your ways will be established.
Do not turn to the right nor to the left;
Turn your foot from evil.

If we read back through this chapter of Proverbs, we can see a theme that weighs heavily upon this section. Verses 1 through 9 of this chapter give us an example of Solomon taking his father's wisdom and building on it. He is teaching the son how to do this by example, and the important lesson from that passage is that of Legacy. As we have discovered over and over in this book, God's intended method of conveying Wisdom and the Kingdom through the ages is the relationship between father and son. This parallel is drawn between father and son often for several reasons. The two most relevant to the Book of Proverbs is 1) Fathers exist because God is our Father and 2) Father's get their authority from God by way of analogy. This means, for us, that our father is like a type for God, both in existence and authority. In some sense, by disobeying or rejecting our fathers, we are disobeying or rejecting God. The parent and child here both have opposing responsibilities which are found in the two passages I closed that sermon with that say, "*Train up a child in the way he should go, Even when he is old he will not depart from it.* (Proverbs 22:6)" and "*Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. Honor your father and mother (which is the first commandment with a promise), so that it may be well with you, and that you may live long on the earth. Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.* (Ephesians 6:1-4)"

The legacy that the son is to receive is not to be one of mere lessons. God was frustrated that the people of Israel just took the lessons of God but refused to love Him or honor Him in their hearts. He told Isaiah, "*Because this people draw near with their words And honor Me with their lip service, But they remove their hearts far from Me, And their reverence for Me consists of tradition learned by*

rote, Therefore behold, I will once again deal marvelously with this people, wondrously marvelous; And the wisdom of their wise men will perish, And the discernment of their discerning men will be concealed. (Isaiah 29:13-14)” It was this passage that Christ referenced when He said, “*Why do you yourselves transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? For God said, ‘Honor your father and mother,’ and, ‘He who speaks evil of father or mother is to be put to death.’ But you say, ‘Whoever says to his father or mother, “Whatever I have that would help you has been given to God,” he is not to honor his father or his mother.’ And by this you invalidated the word of God for the sake of your tradition. You hypocrites, rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you: ‘This people honors Me with their lips, But their heart is far away from Me. ‘But in vain do they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.’*” (Matthew 15:3-9)”

This expectation is then carried by Solomon here. He does not just tell the son wise words, he tells the son constantly to, “*Hear...your father’s instruction; And do not forsake your mother’s teaching; Indeed, they are a graceful wreath to your head And ornaments about your neck.* (1:8-9)”, “*receive my words And treasure my commandments within you* (2:1)”, “*do not forget my teaching, But let your heart keep my commandments* (3:1)”, “*Hear...the instruction of a father, And give attention that you may gain understanding* (4:1)”, “*Hear...and accept my sayings And the years of your life will be many.* (4:10)”, and now “*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.* (4:20-21)” If we take these two commands next to one another, we see this authority and representative connection between our God and our father.

So, these are the threads that Solomon pulls on to deliver this passage we are focusing on today. Through the Wisdom granted by God, Solomon understood the importance of the Father-Son relationship and in this chapter is teaching his own son what it means and how to use it. Now, if the first section of this chapter is about the importance of lineage, and the second section is what a good son looks like, this section strikes at the how. After establishing that 1) the son is to take the legacy of his father and build on it and 2) he must make that legacy his own so that he can pass it down to his own children, we see that Solomon now turns to the heart of his son, dealing practically with HOW the son may do this reliably.

Solomon says “*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 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 speech 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 all your ways will be established. Do not turn to the right nor to the left; Turn your foot from evil. (4:20-27)"

If you remember the passage from Matthew that I quoted above, you will remember that Christ then turned to the crowd after criticizing the Pharisees and scribes and said, "**Hear and understand. It is not what enters into the mouth that defiles the man, but what proceeds out of the mouth, this defiles the man.** (Matthew 15:11)" clarifying to His disciples, "**the things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and those defile the man. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders. These are the things which defile the man; but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile the man.** (Matthew 15:18-20)"

Now, the "heart" in the ancient world involved the whole inner self. It was the will (11:20, 14:14), thoughts (16:1,9; 19:21), mind (3:3, 6:32a, 7:7b, Hosea 7:11), emotions (14:10,13; 17:22; 15:15,30), and whole inner being(3:5). When we look at this passage, we see that the heart is at the center of what the son is instructed to consider and guard. It reads something like an anatomy text, walking through the relevant body parts and their relation to the main point that Solomon is trying to convey to his son: "what comes in informs the heart and what comes out flows from it." We see this in the chiasm that he puts together here: incline the ear, keep in your sight, guard (keep) your heart, watch over your heart, put away a deceitful mouth and devious speech, look straight ahead, fix your gaze, and watch the path of your feet. Solomon works his way to the heart and then shows how the heart is expressed in our actions.

Before we put this argument together, we need to dig into what some of the words in this passage mean. In verse 21, we see that Solomon tells his son to "keep" his commands in the midst of his heart. In the Masoretic text, this "keep" is from the word "shamar", which means to set a hedge of thorns about or to observe and guard carefully. In the Septuagint, the word is "phylasso (foo-las-so)", meaning to guard over something lest it escape, get lost, or be stolen. He is telling his son to take in the lessons he is giving, then to guard them carefully, else the son could lose what he was given. This is a subtle restating of the lessons already given, that true life is one that is taken for a man's own, not one gained by rote tradition (4:20-22, 4:1-9; Isaiah 29:13-14).

Solomon then tells the son to "**watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life**". "Watch" in the Hebrew comes from "natsar", meaning to protect or keep hidden and in the Septuagint is "terei" meaning to attend to carefully. The second line is rendered in slightly different ways in the Masoretic and the Septuagint. The NASB95 translates the Masoretic text as saying,

“for from it flow the springs of life”. The literal meaning of the word “Totsaah” is something like a point of termination or an exit and the word used in the Septuagint is “exodoi” which is the plural of “exodus”, meaning a departure, exit, or a final fate. In other words, the heart is that from which these ends or terminal points, or conclusions come from.

This attention to the heart is both literarily and literally in the center of Solomon’s idea in this passage. So far, it has been the place where the son has been instructed to keep the commands of his father. However, now it becomes the center stage of the son’s actions and the thing that governs and informs his ability to heed and practice discipline. The order of things is just as important as the things themselves. Solomon tells the son how to take in wisdom: “hear my words and see what I do.” He is then told to hold what he hears and sees in his heart like it is something that, at a moment’s notice, could slip away from his grasp. Just like the seed of the parable of the four soils, the Wisdom the son gets from Solomon could be eaten by the birds, choked by weeds, or killed by hostile soil. The son is told to guard it so this will not happen.

Once the son has taken in the wisdom of Solomon and kept it from destruction, now he is tasked with a different kind of guarding: how it is used. Since that wisdom is now in his heart, it will make itself manifest in what he does. Before, he was told to take care how he listened, now he is told to take care how he acts. There are four things that the son is to carefully consider: to put away evil speech, to fix his eyes ahead and not deviate, to watch the path of his feet, and to not turn away from good but to turn away from evil.

In the first command, he is told to put away evil speech. In the Masoretic, the word for “put away” is “haser” which comes from the root “sur” meaning to put aside, cast aside, or even to behead. “Evil speech” is literally a crooked mouth. Just a little bit further in Proverbs, we see a good example of this when Solomon says, **“A worthless person, a wicked man, Is the one who walks with a perverse mouth, Who winks with his eyes, who signals with his feet, Who points with his fingers; Who with perversity in his heart continually devises evil, Who spreads strife. Therefore his calamity will come suddenly; Instantly he will be broken and there will be no healing.”** (6:12-15)” We have already seen the traps that the wicked like to set for the innocent and the son in their enticement. **“Come with us, Let us lie in wait for blood, Let us ambush the innocent without cause; Let us swallow them alive like Sheol, Even whole, as those who go down to the pit; We will find all kinds of precious wealth, We will fill our houses with spoil; Throw in your lot with us, We shall all have one purse** (1:11-14)”

More than the violent man, however, Matthew Henry shows us this expands to much more when he says, “Our hearts being naturally corrupt, out of them a great

deal of corrupt communication is apt to come, and therefore we must conceive a great dread and detestation of all manner of evil words, cursing, swearing, lying, slandering, brawling, filthiness, and foolish talking, all which come from a froward mouth and perverse lips, that will not be governed either by reason or religion, but contradict both, and which are as unsightly and ill-favored before God as a crooked distorted mouth drawn awry is before men. All manner of tongue sins, we must, by constant watchfulness and steadfast resolution, put from us, put far from us, abstaining from all words that have an appearance of evil and fearing to learn any such words. (Matthew Henry Complete Commentary on Chapter 4:20-27, 2.III)” Matthew Henry is just echoing the Apostle Paul when he tells the church in Ephesus, “**Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear.** (Ephesians 4:29)”

The second command is to “**Let your eyes look directly ahead And let your gaze be fixed straight in front of you.** (4:25)”. The command “look directly ahead” is “ortha blepetosan” in the Septuagint. Literally “let your eyes have straight perception.” The second clause is something like “let your perception nod righteousness.” The Masoretic renders it closer to “let your eyes look straight ahead and your eyelids look right before you.” Both of these point to the same thing, as we keep the previous commands in mind. What is in our hearts is what directs our words and eyes. Solomon is telling his son to “keep his eye on the ball. Don’t lose sight of what you are aiming for.” This kind of sight is the sight of a navigator, who carefully looks out into the fog or landscape, taking care to watch where he goes so that he will arrive at his destination safely.

The third command is, “**Watch the path of your feet And all your ways will be established.** (4:26)”. “Watch,” in this passage is “palles magal” in the Hebrew, meaning “ponder the path” or “consider the path” before you. In the Greek Septuagint, it is rendered, “orthas trochias poiei” meaning “make straight paths for your feet.” This command follows the previous command, telling the son to carefully plot his course as he lives his life. His life should not just be haphazard or whatever comes, but the son should carefully consider his actions so that he will wisely reach the end of his life attaining his goal of loving Wisdom. If he does this, Solomon tells him that his paths will be established or straightened out.

The last command is, “**Do not turn to the right nor to the left; Turn your foot from evil.** (4:27)”. Solomon is repeating his commands above, but it echoes his earlier outline on how to fear the Lord when he says, “**Trust in the Lord with all your heart And do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, And He will make your paths straight. Do not be wise in your own eyes; Fear the Lord and turn away from evil.** (3:5-7)” In his phrasing,

Solomon is taking the exact words that God used to instruct the people of Israel on how to obey Him. After giving them the commandments, he says, “*you shall observe to do just as the Lord your God has commanded you; you shall not turn aside to the right or to the left. You shall walk in all the way which the Lord your God has commanded you, that you may live and that it may be well with you, and that you may prolong your days in the land which you will possess.* (Deuteronomy 5:32-33)”

We see the theme that Solomon is teaching to his son in the words I earlier quoted from Christ, “*the things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and those defile the man. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders. These are the things which defile the man; but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile the man.* (Matthew 15:18-20)” Everything goes to and flows from the heart. This means that the son deviating from the right path will corrupt his heart further, be that in speech, distracted action, or purposeless living. Everything the son does MUST be in service to the gathering of wisdom, else he could fall.

Solomon wrote this for his son, but God intended this passage for us, as well.

Firstly, Solomon, a real man, is speaking to his son. He is urging that his son take on his wisdom, make it his own, and then live his entire life in the service of making that wisdom better and passing it on to his children. This idea of lineage is the core structure of the passage that all the meaning is built around. Secondly, this applies not just physically – from a man to his children – but it applies spiritually – from our fathers in the faith to us. Starting with Adam and shifting from Adam to Seth, to Noah, to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, through the Apostles, and all the fathers that came after them – we have a lineage of Christian spiritual fathers that we are called to listen to. In both of these cases – our natural fathers and spiritual fathers – we are called to take on what traditions they have, make them our own through practiced effort, and then pass them on to those who come after us. We are the present link in the chain of our family lineage and of church history, that serves to link the past to the future.

Both applications flow from those factors.

The first application is: Honor your fathers by being like them. As I have said before not all fathers are easy to live like. One of the great tragedies of our present day is that most people either have no father or have a terrible father. In response, most people reject fatherly authority. In both cases, this is sin. We must honor our fathers. In the case of absent or terrible fathers, we are called to baptize our fathers, in a certain sense. We become the Christian version of our fathers. By honoring God, even in our rejection of our father’s sins, we are honoring our

fathers. If our fathers were righteous, they still had weaknesses and failures. Learn what those were and ensure you do not repeat them. Make your father's legacy better than what he could ever hand to you. This is true both spiritually and naturally.

The second application is even more personal and delves into the very core of the Christian religion. You cannot tame your own heart by your own power. Though Solomon's words are wise and true, if we do not have a love for God, we will not guard our heart properly. Through Jeremiah, the Lord says, "*The heart is more deceitful than all else And is desperately sick; Who can understand it? "I, the Lord, search the heart, I test the mind, Even to give to each man according to his ways, According to the results of his deeds.* (Jeremiah 17:9-10)" David knew this and cried, "*Create in me a clean heart, O God, And renew a steadfast spirit within me.* (Psalm 51:10)" It is that new heart that God promises. God says, "*I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances.* (Ezekiel 36:26-27)" and "*I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.* (Jeremiah 31:33b)" Through the power of the Spirit, we of God's Kingdom have been granted repentance.

With this truth firmly in our minds, our path forward is clear: we must guard our hearts. Take into your hearts the truth of God's word and the wisdom of our fathers. Jealously guard it lest we lose it. We must be mindful of our tongues, that they speak what is true and holy. Focus on what is Good, True and Beautiful. As Paul says, "*whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things.* (Philippians 4:8)" and we must set our path before us and not turn aside. "*Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.* (Hebrews 12:1-3)"

Amen