

Proverbs "Guard Your Heart"

Proverbs 4:10-27

Delivered during the COVID-19 pandemic via Livestream at Central Baptist Church on January 24, 2021

INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE 1)** We're doing a series through the book of Proverbs. Proverbs is all about wisdom. We've said that wisdom is the skill of being able to navigate the complex situations of life in a way that honours God.
 - Last week we saw that Proverbs describes life like walking a path. Our passage today picks up that theme again and develops it even further.
- Outside the Bible there is one book that shows this better than any other. It is called *Pilgrim's Progress* and was written by a man named John Bunyan.
 - It is a story that shows how the Christian life is like a journey. The main character is a man named Christian. He flees the City of Destruction, has his sins forgiven at the cross, and starts a long journey along the king's path that leads to the Celestial City. He travels with a friend named Hopeful.
 - They face many difficulties, but there is one particular incident that captures what we want to talk about today.
- At one point Christian and Hopeful are very discouraged because the king's path has been very hard to walk. They wish there was an easier way. It is then they see a meadow on the other side of the wall that runs along the king's path. The meadow is called By-Path Meadow. A by-path is a different path or a side path. Christian points out that the path in the meadow runs parallel alongside the king's path.
 - He turns to Hopeful and says, ***"That would be a far easier path to walk on. Since it follows beside the king's path, let take it instead."***
 - So they do and the other path is indeed much easier to walk on.
- They meet a man on the by-path who says he is also going to the Celestial City. This makes them feel even better about their decision, but when night comes they lose sight of this other man in the darkness. Suddenly they hear the man fall and cry out.
 - Up ahead the man has fallen into a deep pit and broken every bone in his body. The pit was dug there on purpose by the wicked Prince who owns the land.
- Then suddenly it begins to rain and the meadow begins to flood. Hopeful groans and says, ***"Oh that we had stayed on the path."*** Christian also sees how foolish they were and says, ***"Who would have thought that this path could lead us so far astray?"***
 - They want to head back but the waters have risen and the way back is very dangerous. They do eventually make it back but only after getting captured by a Giant, thrown in his dungeon, beaten, and narrowly escaping with their lives.
- In telling this little incident John Bunyan is showing us what our passage today is showing us: that following God's path of wisdom is not always easy, that we are often tempted to leave it for easier paths, but it is foolish to do so for these other paths only lead to problems, pain, and can even result in the total destruction of our lives.
 - Do you want your life to go well? Do you want to avoid wrecking your life? The Bible never promises that following Jesus will be easy, but it does say that there

is a way to live that is wise. This way will save you from many problems and a lot of pain. Even better, this path will eventually lead to your ultimate happiness.

- If you want this, then this passage calls you to do three things today. First, *stick to the path*. Second, *guard your steps*. Third, *do the right thing if you've gone the wrong way*.

STICK TO THE PATH

- Let's begin by looking at verses 10-19. These verses call us to **(SHOW SLIDE 2) Stick to the Path**.
 - In these verses a father is again talking to his young son. Like many young people, this young man is still deciding if he wants to follow God's way. He's on the fence. Throughout Proverbs his father is seeking to make him wise. So, this passage is for everyone, but it is especially for teenagers and young adults.
- The father says there are two paths you can walk in life. The first is the path of wisdom that lives rightly before God. The father describes this in verse 11. **(SHOW SLIDE 3)**
 - **¹¹ I have taught you the way of wisdom; I have led you in the paths of uprightness.**
 - To walk this path is to fear God. To fear God does not mean to be scared of him. It means that his existence and what he has said is the controlling factor of your whole life. You want to live for him. You don't want to displease him. The father goes on to say this path leads to life.
- The father describes the other path in verse 14. **(SHOW SLIDE 4)**
 - **¹⁴ Do not enter the path of the wicked, and do not walk in the way of the evil.**
¹⁵ Avoid it; do not go on it; turn away from it and pass on.
 - He then warns that if you go down this path it will gradually change your very desires. Like we crave food and drink, you will begin to crave the wrong things that will wreck your life.
- **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 5)** So we are all being called to choose which path we will take. But this is also saying that we must choose it every day of our lives.
 - Your character is formed by every little decision you make. You don't just suddenly become a person who is like Jesus just as you don't just suddenly blow up your life.
 - We are all the result of a million choices along the way. Who you are and who you will become is the result of choosing which path you will walk each and every moment of each and every day.
- One of the most powerful examples of all this comes from the life of Oscar Wilde. If you don't know him, he was one of the most famous playwrights in London in the late 19th century. His play "The Importance of Being Earnest" is still performed in London.
 - Early in his life Oscar Wilde chose not to walk God's path of wisdom. He decided he would live for experiences and pleasure. He pursued art, had sexual relationships with men and woman, and wanted to live life to the full.

- What is Oscar Wilde warning us about in this story? That every day we make choices. Those choices may not seem that big, but they all effect our souls. Oscar Wilde is saying that choosing not to walk God’s path seems easier and more fun, and it is for a short time, but it is not what you think. Every step gradually corrupts the soul. At the very end of his life Oscar Wilde wrote these words:
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 6)**
 - **“The gods had given me almost everything.
But I let myself be lured into long spells of senseless and sensual ease.
I grew careless of the lives of others.
I took pleasure where it pleased me, and passed on.**
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 7)**
 - **I forgot that every little action of the common day makes or unmakes character, and that therefore what one has done in the secret chamber, one has some day to cry aloud from the house-top.**
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 8)**
 - **I ceased to be lord over myself.
I was no longer the captain of my soul, and did not know it.
I allowed pleasure to dominate me.
I ended in horrible disgrace.”¹**
- Proverbs is warning everyone, especially the young. The path of living for yourself seems easier. But heed the warning. It leads into further darkness. And so verse 19 says, **(SHOW SLIDE 9)**
 - **“The way of the wicked is like deep darkness;
they do not know over what they stumble.”**
- In contrast, the path of the wisdom that follows God’s way starts out dark, can be hard to walk, but it becomes brighter and brighter, as one learns wisdom. It is like how the dark of night breaks with dawn and then eventually to the bright noon day sun. That is why verse 18 says **(SHOW SLIDE 10)**
 - **“But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn,
which shines brighter and brighter until full day.”**
- Young people, I plead with you to listen to this. Do not believe the lie that you can just live however you like and there are no consequences. Every day you are walking a path that is shaping who you are and who you will become. All those little choices add up.
 - Listen to this father. Listen to Oscar Wilde. You are only at the dawn of your life. It is hard to see very far forward, but following Jesus is the only path that gets brighter and brighter.
 - Choose this path. Stick to this path.

GUARD YOUR STEPS

- Yet, as we turn to the second point, we see in verses 20-27 that we must do something else. Even as you walk the king’s path of wisdom you must **(SHOW SLIDE 11) Guard your Steps.**

¹ Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis*, 1897.

- There will always be temptations to leave the path and take the easier path in By-Path Meadow. So how do you guard your steps so you don't foolishly destroy your life by leaving the king's path? How do you practically guard your steps?
- The main answer is in verse 23. **(SHOW SLIDE 12)**
 - **Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life.**
 - The word "keep" means to guard. Each and every day you must guard your heart. The heart in the Bible is not referring to your physical heart. It is more like when we say, "*She puts her whole heart into her job.*" When we say it like this we are referring to a person's whole being. In the Bible the heart includes the way you think, feel, and make decisions. Biblically speaking your heart is the control centre of your life. So this is a call to guard the control centre because if it goes wrong everything goes wrong. Guard your control centre. Guard your mind. Guard your thoughts. Guard your emotions. Guard your will.
- Why? Because from it flow the springs of life. So your actions flow from what is in your heart, like a spring gives water to drink. In Greater Victoria we get our water from the hills up above Goldstream and Sooke. The rains flow down into reservoirs, go through a process, and then eventually come out your tap.
 - Have you ever walked the Great Trail behind the Humpback Reservoir? It's a beautiful area in the Sooke Hills Wilderness Regional Park. Parts of the trail go along the along the Greater Victoria Water Supply Area. It is very clear when you do this for there are signs telling you to keep out. I took this picture. **(SHOW SLIDE 13)** It warns against going into this area. The sign is guarding the watershed. **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 14)** The CRD has installed video cameras at key locations. There are security patrols and there are hundreds of alarm points along the system that watch for any infection, problems with the flow or pressure levels.
 - Why would the CRD go to all this trouble to guard the watershed? It's obvious. Any problems there means every drop of water in the CRD has problems. Imagine what would happen if some vandal poured toxic waste into the reservoirs.
- Here is the key principle. Whatever is in your heart will flow out into actions. If you allow toxic waste into your heart, then it will poison all parts of your life. Or to change back to the path image, if you allow wrong things into your heart you will easy leave the king's path and bring problems and pain into your life.
 - That is why this passage goes on to mention key areas of life you must guard.
- He calls you to be careful how you speak in verse 24. **(SHOW SLIDE 15)**
 - **Put away from you crooked speech, and put devious talk far from you.**
- He calls you to be careful how you use your eyes in verse 25. **(SHOW SLIDE 16)**
 - **Let your eyes look directly forward, and your gaze be straight before you.**

- He calls you to be careful where you allow your feet to lead you in verses 26-27. **(SHOW SLIDE 17)**
 - ²⁶ **Ponder the path of your feet; then all your ways will be sure.**
 - ²⁷ **Do not swerve to the right or to the left; turn your foot away from evil.**
- **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 18)** So you see verses 20-27 are one big call to guard your steps. Keep your heart with God. This is a daily battle. Many vandals are trying to pour toxic waste into your heart.
 - You must guard your heart each and every moment. Where is the Holy Spirit speaking to you right now? Is it something to do with how you talk? Is it something to do with what you look at with your eyes? Does it have to do with places you allow your feet to take you that are wrong?
 - Guard your heart. Don't leave the king's path.
- But what if you have left the path into By-path Meadow? What then? What if you've walked away from Jesus for a really long time? What should you do?

DO THE RIGHT THING IF YOU'VE GONE THE WRONG WAY

- In third and final place this passage calls you to **(SHOW SLIDE 19) Do the right thing if you've gone the wrong way.**
 - What does that look like to do the right thing?
- **(SHOW SLIDE 20) First, go back to the king's path.**
 - If you have been living a life apart from Jesus then the very first thing you must do is to return to him. If there is one area of your life that you've strayed then go back. C.S. Lewis puts this so well.
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 21) "If you have taken a wrong turn, then to go forward does not get you any nearer. If you are on the wrong road, progress means doing an about-turn and walking back to the right road; and in that case the man who turns back soonest is the most progressive man. We have all seen this when doing arithmetic. When I have started a sum the wrong way, the sooner I admit this and go back and start over again, the faster I shall get on . . . Going back is the quickest way on."**²
- **(SHOW SLIDE 22) Second, receive the king's grace.**
 - Oh what a gracious king we serve. When we have foolishly turned away from him to walk our own paths, you would think he would scold us or even refuse to have us back. But that is not our king.
 - Remember the prodigal son. He walked his own path for years. He was far from home. But when he went back, the Father ran to him, kissed him, embraced him, and threw a giant party because he had returned. This is grace of God. Jesus died for our sins so that we can be welcomed home. Hear the grace of God toward you: my son who was lost is now found.

² C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, ch 5.

- **(SHOW SLIDE 23)** Third, ask the king for a good heart.
 - In one sense, it is *you* who are called to guard your heart. *You* are called to action. But even as we walk the king's road we say with David in Ps 86:11 ***"Give me an undivided heart, that I may fear your name"***
 - Or we pray in the words of Ps 19:14, ***"may the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be pleasing in your sight"***
 - Fall on your knees before Jesus and say, ***"O my king. Please give me heart that loves you! Cause me to hunger and thirst for you. Forgive me for allowing toxic waste into my heart. Oh Father, please do not let me be led into temptation where my heart may be deceived. Oh Father, deliver me from the evil one who so easily deceives me."***
- **(SHOW SLIDE 24)** Finally, stick to the king's path.
 - We end where we began. Stick on the king's path.
 - **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 25)** Like Christian and Hopeful, learn from the pain of your sins. Learn to trust your king more. His path is not always easy to walk, but it is the only path that leads to the Celestial City. When the journey is hard, remember that a day is coming when you will enter that great city with rejoicing. The angels will welcome you. Christians who have died will rush to greet you. They will usher you in and then you will see him. You will look upon the face of your king. Just one look of his beauty, just one look of his glory, will make up for every hard moment on the journey. And he will say, ***"Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."***
 - The call is to follow Jesus now. Stick to the path. Guard your steps. The long journey will be worth it when we reach the great city of God.