

Understanding Our Heart from God's Perspective
Proverbs 4:23-26

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"Follow your heart." It's one of the mottos of today's world. It's a romantic and engaging idea. Perhaps the idea began to gain force back in the 1500's when a playwright named William Shakespeare adapted a previous work into his play entitled "Romeo and Juliet." The play chronicled the love between the two amidst a terrible feud between their families. In the end, both die tragically before they can be together. So in a way, they have become a symbol for following your heart before it's too late.

In our world today, we receive much encouragement to follow our hearts. Actor Robin Williams once said "*There are no rules. Just follow your heart.*" The late entrepreneur Steve Jobs who guided Apple to lead the revolution in computers and electronic devices said "*Your time is limited, so don't waste it living someone else's life. Don't be trapped by dogma - which is living with the results of other people's thinking. Don't let the noise of others' opinions drown out your own inner voice. And most important, have the courage to follow your heart and intuition.*" Singer Celine Dion said "*if you follow your dreams, it means you follow your heart. If you do follow your heart, I don't think you can go wrong.*" There is certainly great value in paying attention to our hearts and what comes out of them.

But what do we actually mean when we say "follow your heart?" Of course we don't mean follow the organ in the upper part of your chest in the direction that it pumps out your blood. We mean follow that part of you which contains your feelings, passions, desires and hopes. In our modern North American culture, the heart basically describes the seat of our emotions. So follow your heart means follow the feelings of your heart. And we're told today that the feelings of our heart are right and true. Not to act on your feeling is to be untrue to yourself. Therefore, you must follow your heart, wherever that leads.

But is this always a wise way to live life? Will following our heart, which means primarily our feelings, lead us to where we need to go? If we're Christians, will following our heart lead us to where God wants us to go?

This year we're focusing on the transforming work of God in our lives. Our theme verse is found on the front page of your bulletin and says, "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another." But what is this transforming work? God is at work changing us to become more and more like Jesus. This is a lifelong process called sanctification where we grow more and more in holiness like Christ. Romans 8:29 states – For those whom God foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the

image of His Son. In Romans 12:2, the author Paul writes – Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.” So God works to transform and conform us to be like Christ. But He doesn’t force this transformation on us. He calls us to cooperate with Him as He works through the Holy Spirit in our lives.

Over the next months before Easter, we will look at our need for transformation in very personal areas of our lives. We can talk about transformation generally, but the Bible talks about transformation specifically. It talks about attitudes, motives, speech and actions. All need transformation so that we respond and act more and more like Jesus.

For the first few messages, we will ask the question “What must we know to cooperate with God’s transforming work in us?” We’re going to see our need to understand our hearts, desires, temptation and emotions. Then we will look at transformation from what came to be known as the 7 deadly sins; Envy; Pride; Gluttony; Sloth; Greed; Generosity; Anger and Lust. We will see how God’s transforming work can move us from envy to contentment; from pride to humility; from gluttony to the joy of delayed gratification; from sloth to the dignity of work; from greed to generosity; from anger to gentleness and from lust to love.

But where will we find all this? Our primary source will be the book of Proverbs in the Old Testament. Now if you’ve never spent much time in the Proverbs, you’re in for something unique. Tim Keller writes “A proverb is a poetic, terse, vivid, thought-provoking saying that conveys a world of truth in a few words.” Proverbs can be quite memorable. But we’re not very familiar with their style. Keller writes “They are neither absolute commands nor promises, and often they are partial. That is, they need to be put beside other proverbs on the same subject to get the full picture. They are observations about how life works. The point of a proverb is to get rightly related to reality through hard thinking and sustained reflection.” He also writes “A proverb is like hard candy: If you just bite down on it, you get little out of it and may even get a broken tooth. Instead, you must meditate on it until the sweetness of insight comes.” So we will take time to suck on the hard candy of the Proverbs in this series until we gain some of the sweetness and flavor that can be found in them.

Today, we look at what Proverbs says about our hearts. This will help us with what we need to know to cooperate with God’s transforming work in us.

²⁰ My son, be attentive to my words;
incline your ear to my sayings.

²¹ Let them not escape from your sight;
keep them within your heart.

²² For they are life to those who find them,
and healing to all their flesh.

²³ Keep your heart with all vigilance,
for from it flow the springs of life.

²⁴ Put away from you crooked speech,
and put devious talk far from you.

²⁵ Let your eyes look directly forward,
and your gaze be straight before you.

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.

What must we know to cooperate with God’s transforming work in us?

We must understand our hearts from God’s perspective. Why? We need a lot of help in understanding ourselves. If you don’t believe me, just look around at the world. People flock to counselors, doctors and self-help books to try to understand and better themselves. People talk to others for advice, direction and counsel. People hire life coaches, talk to mentors and seek out those who have more experience.

God is the only one who can offer error free counsel. He knows us completely. And He can discern and expose the motives and deep things in our hearts. We find His perspective in the Bible and in this book of Proverbs. But before we can understand our hearts, we need to know what the Bible means by our hearts. We’re used to “heart” meaning the deepest seat or place of our emotions.

What is the heart from the perspective of Proverbs? We get a sense in verse 23 of the passage just read. “Keep your heart with all vigilance for from it flow the springs of life.” The New International Version of the Bible translates it “Above all guard your heart for it is the wellspring of life.” The heart is like a water source from which our lives erupt.

Keller writes, “In the Bible, the heart is not primarily the seat of emotions in contrast to the head as the seat of reason. Rather, the heart is the seat of your deepest trusts, commitments, and loves from which everything flows.” The ESV Study Bible says the “Heart in Proverbs regularly refers to the center of one’s inner life and orientation to God, from which a

person does all thinking, feeling and choosing.” Derek Kidner who wrote classic commentaries on Psalms and Proverbs defines the heart as “**the mind, emotions and whole inner being.**” So in the Bible and especially in Proverbs, when you see heart, don’t just think emotions. Think of your whole inner self – mind, emotions, choices, passions, deepest trusts and commitments. Your heart, according to the Bible, is that part of you from which everything else flows out into your life and into the world. With that in mind, we’re ready to ask the next question.

What does Proverbs teach us about the heart?

1) Our heart can deceive us and but not the Lord. Proverbs 16:2 states “All a person’s ways seem pure to him but motives are weighed by the Lord.” All the ways of a person are pure in their own eyes but the Lord weighs the spirit. Now I think very few of us would conclude we have impure motives. Maybe we’re aware that sometimes we do act on impure motives. But most of the time we’d conclude “my motives are pure.” But this proverb reveals a reality about us. Our ways seem pure to us. But God actually weighs our heart or know what is in our heart.

We see this Proverb played out in the Old Testament when Israel sought a king in 1st Samuel 16. The Lord sends Samuel to the house of Jesse. Samuel asks to meet Jesse’s sons. When Samuel sees Jesse’s oldest son Eliab, Samuel the prophet concludes that this must be the one God would choose as king? Why? Because Eliab was good looking, strong and tall. But listen to what the Lord says to Samuel about Eliab. 1st Samuel 16:7 – “Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature because I have rejected him. For the Lord sees not as man sees; man looks on the outward appearance but the Lord looks on the heart.” Samuel thought he knew who should be king. But the Lord knew what was in Eliab’s heart. So He rejected him as king. Our hearts can deceives us and we can deceive others about the true state of our hearts.

Now think about what this means especially in light of one of that cultural motto - “Follow your heart.” Proverbs says “Learn not to completely trust your heart. Trust the Lord to weigh your heart” Listen to how one commentator applies this Proverb. “You don’t know yourself unless you know that your motives are never pure, and that they seem better to you than they do to the Lord, who weighs them. This has huge implications for decision making and relationships. If you are always sure of your sincerity and purity, you will make impulsive snap judgments. You will be too dismissive of some options and ideas and too doggedly committed to others.

So we must learn to not just trust our heart. “Not trusting your heart prevents two opposite errors. On the one hand, our consciences can be too easy on us. Follow God’s Word instead of your feelings. If the Scripture says it is wrong, it is. On the other hand, our hearts can be too hard on us. “if our hearts condemn us . . . God is greater than our hearts” (1 John 3:20). Follow the gospel instead of your feelings. You are loved for Christ’s sake, not because your heart and life are perfect. Without God’s Word of grace to build us up (Acts 20:32) we will fall into false guilt or false innocence.

Into which of these two are you more likely to fall – too easy on yourself or too hard on yourself? We must learn to put more trust in what God thinks of us than what comes out of our hearts. So Proverbs reveals that our hearts can deceive us.

2) No one has a perfectly pure or clean heart. Proverbs 20:9 – “Who can say, ‘I have kept my heart pure; I am clean and without sin?’”

Now this is a pretty familiar statement if you’ve read the New Testament. But if someone only reads Proverbs, they may conclude that if you follow it’s wisdom you can make yourself good solely through your own efforts. So we have to pay attention to proverbs like this one. It reminds us that the wisdom of Proverbs is a gift of grace. No one can say “I have kept my heart pure and I am clean and without sin. No one can absolute purity. The apostle Paul wrote “There is no one righteous, not even one.” (Romans 3:10). The Psalmist writes “if you Lord, kept a record of sin, who could stand?” (Psalm 130:3). In Genesis 6:5 we read “The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth and the every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.” Jeremiah the prophet writes “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?” – Jeremiah 17:9. Jesus said in Matthew 15:18 and 19 – But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart. And this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness and slander.” These verses all combine to reveal why we need transformation. Much inside of us is crooked, twisted or stained. We need God to do His work in us to change us. We don’t only need a change in external behavior. We need a change in heart.

Yet this is the good news of the Gospel. **3) So the only way to gain a pure or clean heart is through God’s grace.** Everyone is lost. To be clean and pure is to be acceptable before God, but no one is. Both moral and immoral are alienated from God in different ways. So God must save and change our hearts by grace. He declared this intention already in the Old Testament. Ezekiel 11:19 for example - And I will give them one **heart**, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will

remove the **heart** of stone from their flesh and give them a **heart** of flesh.” This changed heart theme is picked up in the New Testament – Romans 10:8-10 - But what does it say? “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your **heart**” (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your **heart** that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the **heart** one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.” 2 Corinthians 4:6 - For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our **hearts** to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

When I understand my heart is deceitful, impure and unclean on it’s own, I then realize my need for His help to change. I also see the distance between my heart and Jesus’ heart. I see what Jesus is like and I see what I am like. I see where my heart is becoming more like Jesus’. And I see other areas where I need a deep heart change.

So understanding my heart from God’s perspective encourages me but also helps me see where I need to pray for His change in me. This past Fall, I struggled in what seems like a pretty simple and unimportant area. My home desk was a mess. I just piled papers, mail, receipts and home items to deal with. Sometimes my desk looked more like a disaster zone than a desk. The things piling up needed attention and were costing our family money. I couldn’t understand why I wasn’t getting to it or why I kept avoiding it.

Then I came across this statement in a little devotional. “Disorganization is selfishness, a lack of self-sacrificial love in little things.” A lack of self-sacrificial love in little things – Those little things on my desk, if looked after, could actually help and show love to others and to God. But I needed a heart change. I needed some exposure to the heart issue behind my avoidance.

We don’t ever read that Jesus had a really organized desk. But we do know that He constantly consulted His Father and knew what priorities were paramount. Sometimes those included sacrificing Himself to do the little things - cooking breakfast for His disciples; likely working as a carpenter and looking after his family especially after his earthly father died; spending time with the obscure and unimportant according to the world. Jesus was willing to sacrifice self in the little things. My heart needed some adjustment to face and tackle the pile on my home desk.

So much of our struggles and tension at home comes from a lack of self-sacrificing love. I’m not saying we brush significant issues under the carpet. But how much better could our families and marriages function if each person prayed and asked the Lord for His strength to show self-sacrificing love at home in the little things? Such a love would think things

like

“I’ll help clean up that mess even though I didn’t make it. I’ll do the dishes even though it’s not my turn. I’ll help with a problem even though I might not know all the answers. I’ll take out the garbage without being asked. I will turn off the TV or get off my phone to help get supper ready rather than just holler from the couch “what’s for supper and when will it be ready?” What a difference self-sacrificing love could make around home. But it doesn’t come naturally to us. Remember all our ways seem pure to us. We justify why we can’t do that. Yet we need Jesus to change our hearts. This leads us to last reality about the heart from Proverbs we will look at today.

Since our hearts are deceitful, impure and unclean and we need God’s grace to change, **4) We must cooperate with the Holy Spirit to guard our hearts.** Proverbs 4:23 as “Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life.” NIV says “Guard your heart for out of it flows the wellspring of life.” Our hearts can be corrupted, tainted, stained, misdirected and diseased. So we need to guard them. But how? The next verses show us how.

Verse 24 teaches us to pay attention to the way we talk. **Put away crooked and perverse speech.** The way we speak can influence our hearts. Most of you in this room do not work in Christian environments. So you hear all kinds of language. I remember when I worked at a fertilizer plant in Calgary for a summer job. My coworkers had studied in the school of creative cursing. They could swear in ways that I never even imagined was possible. They used the F word as an adjective for everything. It described the boss, the work, their drive in to work, the weather, their bed, the in-laws, a stubborn piece of equipment, the cloud of fertilizer dust we sometimes worked in. I confess that before long, their continual speech began to go through my head and into my heart.

But this passage says fight that. Put away from yourself crooked speech – talk that is not straight. Put away words or ways of talking that are not totally honest or only gives half the picture. Put away devious talk – words that are intended to present something as if its real when the speaker knows it’s not. Keeping watch over your mouth with the help of the Spirit is one way to guard your heart.

Verse 25 shows us another way. We can guard our heart by **keeping our eyes fixed directly forward or straight ahead.** The image here is of a person going on a path and staying focused on going forward. It likely refers to a path God wants us to travel. It’s a path He wants us to go and we guard our hearts by not looking at that which distracts us from the path. So that means we have to guard against letting our eyes focus on something not on God’s path for us. If we

look long enough, it can capture our heart. In Joshua 7, Israel conquered the fortified city of Jericho. They had been commanded not to take any plunder for themselves. But one soldier named Achan gazed at the plunder until he took some himself. His refusal to keep focused on the path directly ahead cost the lives of 36 fellow soldiers. It delayed Israel's conquest by several days.

Think about how easy it is to get distracted in our world. You're working on homework or reading something important your phone dings or buzzes. You can immediately get drawn into gazing at something on your phone. When we stare at our phones, we can't accomplish anything else. I know people try to all the time. You've probably had to stop on the road while someone walks in front of you while looking at their phone. But you actually can't do anything else productive when your gazing at your phone. We can lose focus and get distracted and expose our hearts to that which tempts us or that which wastes our time on unimportant stuff.

We also guard our hearts by **considering carefully the path we walk with our feet**. Verse 26 says "Ponder the path of your feet; then all your ways will be sure. Do not swerve to the right or the left; turn your foot away from evil." So here is a call to take wise paths. You can be on a mountain top and then decide to go down the mountain. But you have to ponder the path. You have to consider where you will step and how you will get down. You can't just step out into the air and get down if you want to live. So we must consider obstacles or danger zones and plan to get around them or to go through them in a way where you won't get hurt. It's like driving on an icy highway. You don't fly down the road as if it's summer. You watch for ice and other vehicles and snow patches. Even though it takes longer, you eventually get there. We guard our hearts when we cautiously and carefully consider the path of our lives and cry out to the Lord for His guidance.

Thankfully, we're not alone in guarding our hearts. Psalm 7:10 states "My shield is God Most High." Or Philippians 4:6-7 state "Do not be anxious about anything but in everything by prayer and petition let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God which transcends all understanding will guard your hearts in Christ Jesus."

So to cooperate with God's transforming work in our lives, we need to understand our hearts from His perspective. They deceive us but not God. They are impure and unclean but through the Gospel, God gives us new hearts and begins to transform us. We need to work with the Holy Spirit to guard our hearts in what we say and see and where we're going. We need to constantly turn to God for His help. When we are confused, God can bring clarity. When we don't know the

way, God brings direction. When we don't understand, God brings His peace. Because of Christ, we can be rescued from our wicked and wayward hearts. Let's celebrate that now as we come to the Lord's Table.