



Oh! Be Careful!

Proverbs 4:20-27

- 1. A Little Reminder (verses 20-22)**
- 2. Keep Your Heart (verse 23)**
- 3. Tame Your Tongue (verse 24)**
- 4. Aim Your Eyes (verse 25)**
- 5. Ponder Your Paths (verses 26-27)**

I want to begin this morning by singing a song. I don't want to sing it by myself. I want all of us to sing it together. I think that most of you know the song. If you don't, it's pretty easy to pick up. It goes like this. [\[1\]](#)

O be careful little eyes what you see,
O be careful little eyes what you see,
For the Father up above is looking down in love,
So be careful little eyes what you see.

O be careful little ears what you hear...

O be careful little tongue what you say...

O be careful little hands what you do...

O be careful little feet where you go...

O be careful little mind what you think...

O be careful little heart whom you trust...

This little song is entirely biblical. Proverbs 15:3 says.

Proverbs 15:3

The eyes of the LORD are in every place,
keeping watch on the evil and the good.

God knows everything that we see, everything that we say, everything that we hear, everything we do, everywhere we go, and everything we think. That's why we need to be watchful over our hearts, by carefully pondering who and what we trust. This little song is a good overview of our text this morning, Proverbs 4:20-27, because in our text Solomon appeals to his son to watch over his eyes and his ears and his tongue and his feet and his heart: the ways in which the world enters into his being, and the ways in which he acts with his body in the world. To all of this, Solomon says to walk carefully. Or, as you might say, "Oh, be careful!" That is the title of my message this morning.

I want to begin by drawing a connection to an allegory. Last week I mentioned John Bunyan and *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Those verses from chapter 4 give the imagery of life as a walk, and *The Pilgrim's Progress* is a great picture of a Christian's journey from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City. But *The Pilgrim's Progress* wasn't the only allegory that John Bunyan wrote. He also wrote one entitled *The Holy War*. Rather than envisioning the Christian's life as a walk, he focused upon the battle the Christian faces with sin, centering his attention upon the struggle for the soul.

In *The Holy War*, Bunyan tells the story of a town called Mansoul, built by one Shaddai. Bunyan writes about the town in these terms.^[2]

[Shaddai] made it the mirror and glory of all that he made. So goodly a town was Mansoul when first built, the gods came down to see it, and sang for joy. And as he made it goodly to behold, so also mighty to have dominion over all the country round about.

Bunyan went on to describe how a palace was in the heart of the town.

For strength, it might be called a castle; for pleasantness, a paradise; for largeness, a place so copious as to contain all the world. This place the King Shaddai intended but for himself alone, and not another with him.

He described the walls of the town this way:

The walls of the town were well built, yea, so fast and firm were they knit and compact together, that, had it not been for the townsmen themselves, they could not have been shaken or broken forever.

Then Bunyan described the gates of the town.

This famous town of Mansoul had five gates, in at which to come, out of which to go; and such as could never be opened nor forced but by the will and leave of those within. The names of the gates were these: Ear-gate, Eye-gate, Mouth-gate, Nose-gate, and Feel-gate.

Here is Bunyan's picture of the soul. It cannot be breached except through the gates, and the gates are the ears and the eyes and the mouth and the nose and the touch. Solomon has the same idea in our text: oh, be careful about what you hear through the ear; oh, be careful about what you see through the eye; oh, be careful about what you say with your mouth, because these things are gates into your soul. If the wrong things get in, they will destroy your soul. That's what *The Holy War* is about: the assault of Diabolus, the great and mighty evil prince, upon the town of Mansoul, seeking to take it as his own possession.

Indeed, he succeeds, when Lord Innocency is murdered, Lord Understanding is demoted, Mr. No-Truth enters the town, and Lord Lustings becomes Mayor. But the gospel is preached and war is declared, as Emmanuel leads the attack to gain back the town of Mansoul. Eventually Christ enters the town, Mansoul is saved, Lord Understanding is reinstated as Mayor, the image of Diabolus is taken down, and all things become new. But the book is not over. As Mansoul neglects reformation and mortification, the town is in danger once more. Diabolus, seeing his chance, continues his attacks, sending Mr. Carnal Security to assault the town from within. Mr. Godly Fear and Mr. Conscience speak to the citizens and urge them to remain strong. On the outside, Mr. Deceit schemes to attack by sending an army of doubters. But eventually Emmanuel, the author and finisher of our faith, returns to lead the resistance. Through the efforts of Captain Self-denial, Election-doubter, Vocation-doubter, and Grace-doubter are tried and executed. Mr. Live-by-Feeling and Legal-Life are imprisoned with life sentences. Mr. Unbelief flees the town. The Holy War ends with Emmanuel's victory speech.

The key to keeping the town was guarding the gates: Ear-gate, Eye-gate, Mouth-gate, Nose-gate, and Feel-gate. This is exactly what Solomon is telling us this

morning. So let's get into our text. I invite you to open your Bibles and turn to Proverbs, chapter 4. If you didn't bring a Bible, please take one from the chair in front of you and turn to page 530.

Proverbs 4:20-27

My son, be attentive to my words;
incline your ear to my sayings.
Let them not escape from your sight;
keep them within your heart.
For they are life to those who find them,
and healing to all their flesh.
Keep your heart with all vigilance,
for from it flow the springs of life.
Put away from you crooked speech,
and put devious talk far from you.
Let your eyes look directly forward,
and your gaze be straight before you.
Ponder the path of your feet;
then all your ways will be sure.
Do not swerve to the right or to the left;
turn your foot away from evil.

Did you notice the body parts that Solomon mentions? He mentions hearing in verse 20, seeing in verse 21, and the heart in verse 21. In verse 22, he talks about the flesh. In verse 23, he again talks about the heart. In verse 24, he talks about the tongue and what we say. In verse 25, he talks about the eyes. In verse 26, he talks about the feet. We begin with the first point.

1. A Little Reminder (verses 20-22)

If you have been with us during our exposition of Proverbs, these first three verses should be familiar, not because we have read them before, but because they cover the same theme that Solomon raises at the beginning of every section. They are a call to his son to be attentive and to listen to his words, a call to keep his words, and they contain a promise of life.

Proverbs 4:20-22

My son, be attentive to my words;
incline your ear to my sayings.
Let them not escape from your sight;

keep them within your heart.
For they are life to those who find them,
and healing to all their flesh.

Again, I repeat it: young people, listen to the wisdom of Solomon. Pay attention. Keep the Proverbs always before you. Let them not depart from your sight. There is an easy way to do this. You could read a chapter of Proverbs every day. There are 31 chapters in Proverbs and 31 days in a month, which equates to one chapter every day. I know of many people who have done this. I was at the Men's Retreat this past weekend with Crossway Chapel of Fox Valley. One of the men there asked me if I was preaching this Sunday. I said, "Yes! I'm preaching through Proverbs." He said, "Proverbs! I love that book. I read through it twelve times every year, once a month." Could you imagine the wisdom you could obtain by making this your practice? You would certainly fulfill the thrust of verse 21: "Let them not escape from your sight."

But I can only hope that the second part of verse 21 would also be true: "keep them within your heart." That is, that the Proverbs would be far more than head knowledge, but heart knowledge as well. At the retreat, one of the speakers was Glen, the chaplain at Wayside Cross Mission (a place like the Rockford Rescue Mission). He brought a few of his men to the retreat. In Glen's talk, he gave the picture they often use at the mission: they hold the Bible up to their foreheads to show how important it is to know God's word, then they place the Bible over their hearts to show how much more important it is to have God's word there. That is what Solomon wants for us in verse 21: that we see his words all the time, and that they are on our hearts. The reason is simple: verse 22 tells us they are life to those who find them, and healing to all their flesh. This is Solomon's repeated theme.

Proverbs 4:10

Hear, my son, and accept my words,
that the years of your life may be many.

And in chapter 3.

Proverbs 3:1-2

My son, do not forget my teaching,
but let your heart keep my commandments,
for length of days and years of life
and peace they will add to you.

If I can persuade you of anything in our exposition of Proverbs, it is this: wisdom is good for us. It leads to life. It leads to blessing. It leads to good things. In some ways it is like exercise. There are times when we are tired and don't want to exercise. There are times when exercise hurts as our muscles are stretched to fatigue. But afterwards we always come back stronger and feel better. So it is with wisdom: it may be difficult at times, and we may not always want to follow her counsel, but in the end we will be better for having done so.

2. Keep Your Heart (verse 23)

We read.

Proverbs 4:23

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

The idea of “keeping” here is the idea of guarding, protecting, and caring. Guard your heart. Protect your heart. Keep it safe from attack. Keep it healthy. We all know how important this is physically: when knights went to battle, they wore a breastplate, the armor that covered their torsos to protect their hearts. Today, when police are on duty, they wear bulletproof vests to protect their chests and their hearts. But verse 23 is talking about our spiritual hearts, the core of our being.

In our society today, we often think of the heart as the home of our emotions. Valentine's Day is a day of love, a day of feeling, expressed with heart-shaped candies and heart-shaped cards. But the Bible uses the heart differently. In fact, in the Bible it is the stomach, or the bowels, that is the center of the emotions. The heart is something broader and deeper than that. In the Bible, the heart is the center of our whole being. The Bible speaks about how we think in our hearts (Joshua 23: 14). The Bible speaks about how we reason in our hearts. The heart is where we form our decisions and express our will.

Proverbs 16:9

The heart of man plans his course,
but the LORD establishes his steps.

As one theologian says, “The heart is the seat of rational functions. . . . From the heart comes planning and volition. . . . Religious and moral conduct is rooted in the heart.”^[3] Another theologian says it this way: “The heart is the organ which wills or decides, thinks, knows, and judges between right and wrong.”^[4] I had one

professor in seminary who liked to describe the heart as the “Mission Control Center” of our being: where everything in us connects, where all communication flows, where all decisions are made, where all commands are sent forth.

Think of the Apollo missions, or the space shuttle, or a mission to Mars. You have perhaps seen footage of NASA’s mission control center: a room full of perhaps fifty of the most highly trained scientists, all on their headsets, all at their computer screens, all watching their monitors, everything flowing through that one room. When something goes wrong, it is Houston that hears about it first, because everything the mission does goes through that command center. That is the heart.

This is exactly what Solomon says: “Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life.” Life flows from your heart. Your heart is where you decide what you will see and hear and do and say. Your heart is where you will make the day-to-day decisions of your life. Your heart is where you will make the key decisions of your life.

For that reason, we need to keep our hearts “with all vigilance.” Some translations say “diligence.” The New Living Translation says, “Guard your heart above all else.” In other words, the most important thing about you is your heart. When it comes to our relationship with the Lord, the heart is central to it all. To be saved from our sins, we need to believe in Christ from our hearts.

Romans 10:9

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.

To walk in obedience to the Lord, we need to do so from the heart: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” (Matthew 22:37). Jesus condemned those whose religion was merely external.

Matthew 15:8

This people honors me with their lips,
but their heart is far from me.

Genuine religion comes from within, from the heart. Christianity comes from the inside out, not from the outside in. We live our lives unto the Lord because that’s

where our affections lie, not because we want to perform some sort of religious duty. God is interested not merely in what we do, but why we do it. When it comes to wisdom, the heart plays the crucial role. It is where the seat of our faith lies.

Proverbs 3:5-6

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 straight your paths.

3. Tame Your Tongue (verse 24)

Not only does Solomon say in verse 23, "Keep Your Heart," but he also says in verse 24, "Tame Your Tongue."

Proverbs 4:24

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

Proverbs talks a great deal about the tongue and our speech, and there is no way we will be able to exhaust the subject today. Let's simply recognize that our speech is powerful.

Proverbs 18:21

Death and life are in the power of the tongue,
and those who love it will eat its fruits.

With your tongue, you can destroy others. With your tongue, you can build others up. Many Proverbs speak to both sides of this.

Proverbs 10:11

The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life,
but the mouth of the wicked conceals violence.

Proverbs 12:18

There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts,
but the tongue of the wise brings healing.

Proverbs 15:4

A gentle tongue is a tree of life,
but perverseness in it breaks the spirit.

You can use your tongue for great good, or you can use it for great harm. Verse 24 speaks about the harmful speech: the crooked speech, the devious talk, the sort of language that destroys. A quick survey of Proverbs reveals that the tongue is often used to stir up dissension and strife (Proverbs 6:12, 14); the tongue is used to quarrel and insult (Proverbs 22:10); the tongue can lead to ruin (Proverbs 10:14); reckless words can pierce like a sword (Proverbs 12:18); flattery works to bring ruin (Proverbs 26:28); gossip stirs up quarrels (Proverbs 26:20); lying lips will bring punishment (Proverbs 19:5); teasing others is like shooting deadly arrows (Proverbs 26:18); a deceitful tongue can crush the spirit (Proverbs 15:4).

How many children have been crushed because of the way their parents speak to them? You have seen it: in some public place, a grocery store, a library, a sporting event, you see and hear how parents talk to their children. They berate them, demean them, insult them, threaten them. How sad it is: they crush their spirits. Solomon simply says, "Put away from you crooked speech, and put devious talk far from you."

Parents, I put this directly on you. In the last sermon I urged your children to listen to you. But you parents need to speak in such a kind and gracious way that your words are attractive, that your children are drawn to listen rather than driven away. Smooth that path. Do not use the stabbing and crushing words that destroy. There is a balance here. Yes, children, you must obey; but parents, speak in such a way that obedience is something your children want to give.

James, the brother of our Lord, puts it plainly.

James 3:2, 7-8

We all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body. ... For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

It is difficult to contain the tongue, because we are not perfect. One simple piece of advice when it comes to the tongue is this: think before you talk. Ask yourself

whether your words are going to be the life-giving words that we all crave, or whether they will cut down and destroy. Talk only after you have thought about what you are going to say.

Proverbs 10:19

When words are many, transgression is not lacking,
but whoever restrains his lips is prudent.

Those who talk a lot tend to sin a lot with their mouths, because they don't have time to think about what they are going to say: it just comes out. They don't restrain their lips, and they say things they regret. It leads to self-inflicted destruction.

Proverbs 18:6-7

A fool's lips walk into a fight,
and his mouth invites a beating.
A fool's mouth is his ruin,
and his lips are a snare to his soul.

That is why Solomon says, "Put away from you crooked speech, and put devious talk far from you." He wants our life. He wants our best. He wants life to go well with us.

4. Aim Your Eyes (verse 25)

In verse 25, Solomon says, 4. Aim Your Eyes.

Proverbs 4:25

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

The idea here is that we should focus our attention upon the right things. Failing to keep your eyes where they should be has been the downfall of many. Eve's sin began by looking at the forbidden fruit. Lot's wife looked back and met her end (Genesis 19). Achan's sin began when he looked at the banned plunder. David's sin began when he looked at Bathsheba bathing. Charles Bridges says, "The pleasure of sin, and the seductions of a tempting world, do not lie in the road."^[5]

Solomon here is calling us to consider where our eyes are looking, and there are many places where you should not be looking. Jesus acknowledged the power of the sexual look.

Matthew 5:27-28

You have heard that it was said, “You shall not commit adultery.” But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

We will talk about this more next week when we look at Proverbs 5 and sexual sin. Much of the sexual sin that comes today comes as a sin of the eye, as we look at inappropriate images on our screens. For that, we must learn from Job, who said, “I have made a covenant with my eyes; how then could I gaze at a virgin?” (Job 31:1). The antidote to a wandering eye is a focused eye. Spiritually, we need to keep our eyes focused upon Jesus.

Hebrews 12:1-3

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.

Looking to Jesus will help us with sin and temptation: remembering all that he did for us on the cross, remembering his power and grace. Peter’s sinking began when he looked at the water rather than at Christ. This is beautifully captured in a hymn by Daniel W. Whittle, written in 1887.^[6]

I looked to Jesus in my sin,
My woe and want confessing;
Undone and lost, I came to Him,
I sought and found a blessing.

*Refrain: “I looked to Him;” ‘Tis true, His “Whosoever;”
“He looked on me; And we were one for ever.”*

I looked to Jesus on the cross;
For me I saw Him dying;

God's Word believed, that all my sins
Were there upon Him lying. [*Refrain*]

I looked to Jesus there on high;
From death upraised to glory;
I trusted in His power to save,
Believed the old, old story. [*Refrain*]

5. Ponder Your Paths (verses 26-27)

Finally, in verses 26 and 27, Solomon says, 5. Ponder Your Paths.

Proverbs 4:26-27

Ponder the path of your feet;
then all your ways will be sure.
Do not swerve to the right or to the left;
turn your foot away from evil.

There are places where you simply shouldn't go. You shouldn't visit the strip club. You shouldn't go to the adult store. You shouldn't go to a brothel. You shouldn't go to the abortion clinic. You shouldn't go to the sinful party. You shouldn't go to the gang meeting. To be sure, we ought not to go to these places, but verses 26 and 27 have a somewhat larger scope of application.

They are picturing life as a path. Do you remember our text from last week? It talked about walking down the paths of wisdom and uprightness. Solomon returns again to that imagery.

Proverbs 4:11-19

I have taught you the way of wisdom;
I have led you in the paths of uprightness.
When you walk, your step will not be hampered,
and if you run, you will not stumble.
Keep hold of instruction; do not let go;
guard her, for she is your life.
Do not enter the path of the wicked,
and do not walk in the way of the evil.
Avoid it; do not go on it;
turn away from it and pass on.
For they cannot sleep unless they have done wrong;

they are robbed of sleep unless they have made someone stumble.
For they eat the bread of wickedness
and drink the wine of violence.
But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn,
which shines brighter and brighter until full day.
The way of the wicked is like deep darkness;
they do not know over what they stumble.

There is a beautiful connection worth noting as we close. Solomon says in verse 26, “Ponder the path of your feet.” Turn over to Proverbs 5:21, and you will find that God does the very same thing: “A man’s ways are before the eyes of the LORD, and he ponders all his paths.” We are called to ponder our paths, and God himself ponders all our paths.

This is exactly where we began this morning, with Proverbs 15:3: “The eyes of the LORD are in every place, keeping watch on the evil and the good.” That is why we must be careful with what we see, careful with what we hear, careful with what we say, careful with what we do, careful with where we walk, careful with what we think, and careful with whom we trust. For the Father up above is looking down in love. Oh, be careful!

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on September 29, 2019
by Steve Brandon.

For more information see www.rockvalleybiblechurch.org.

[1] “Oh Be Careful Little Eyes,” author unknown; a traditional children’s hymn, public domain.

[2] John Bunyan, *The Holy War*. You can read it online here: <https://johnbunyan.org/en/the-holy-war/>.

[3] Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), vol. 3, s.v. “kardia.”

[4] Paul Heinisch, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgicalm Press, 1950), 160.

[5] Charles Bridges, *An Exposition of the Book of Proverbs* (New York: Robert Carter, 1847), 54.

[6] Daniel W. Whittle, "I Looked to Jesus," in *Gospel Hymns No. 5*, ed. Ira Sankey, James McGranahan, and George C. Stebbins (Cincinnati: John Church / Biglow & Main, 1887). Public domain.