

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Everyday Wisdom: Matters of the Heart”

Dr. Jay Howell

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Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life. Proverbs 4:23

Anxiety weighs down the human heart, but a good word cheers it up. Proverbs 12:25

The heart knows its own bitterness, and no stranger shares its joy. Proverbs 14:10

Even in laughter the heart is sad, and the end of joy is grief. Proverbs 14:13

I'm grateful to Pastor Mark for putting together this series in the Book of Proverbs, a book focused on godly wisdom and just what that means. Proverbs is one of those books that, just by its format, can be a bit scattershot on the small scale, in total it offers a view of creation and our relationship with God that can be pretty powerful, just from a bunch of different angles, and a big part of that is in fact a verse from Proverbs 9. Verse 10 reads, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is in sight.”

It means that every notion we have about wisdom doesn't come from experience or age or our own devices, but rather starts first and foremost with whether we align our lives in fear, in reverence of the Lord. And that applies to every other topic, every other tidbit of wisdom that Proverbs offers. Wisdom begins with fearing, revering the Lord. So each week we're looking at a particular thread in the Book of Proverbs, and this week, as you'll hear, we're reading a handful of verses that all deal with something very close to, forgive the pun, our hearts. Let's read God's Word together.

[Read verses.] Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Red heart, blue heart, purple heart, green heart. No, it's not the start of a modernized Dr. Seuss book, instead of “One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish.” It's just a selection of some of the most popular emojis in texts and social media that are all shaped like hearts, just of different colors. “Emojis,” for those of us who may not be as up to date on current communication trends, are those symbols or shapes that you might see in text messages, like a smiley face or something.

And hearts are especially popular, because as you might imagine it's a quick way to communicate that you love something or someone. Seems to translate across all languages. But there's a code to using them. Obviously red hearts are the most popular and the most used, because they're kind of the staple. But red hearts, you know, can be a bit intense. A lot of feeling, a lot of passion in a red heart. You put too many of those things in a message or a post or a Tweet, folks might get the wrong idea.

So, there are other colors. You could use a blue heart, if you want to make sure there's absolutely nothing romantic at all in your response. So if you wanted to friend-zone another individual, blue hearts are your best bet. Or if someone has lost a loved one, a white heart can convey sympathy. Or if you wanted to be a bit ironic, or if you're in med school, the anatomical heart, as in a picture of an actual heart, could be what you go with.

Aren't you glad you were here for this little tutorial? The point is, it's obvious that seemingly universally the idea of the heart is a pretty important one, but it can mean different things. You can come at it from different angles.

Now that's something of what we'll be looking at today, because you probably noticed that each of the verses we read, each proverb, included the word "heart" in it. You see, in Scripture and in ancient Israel, the notion of the heart was just as central then as it is today, but Scripture would come to it from different angles.

The way we usually understand someone's heart in the metaphorical sense is that it's the center of feeling, maybe intuition, the soul even. We tend to distinguish it from, say, the head or the mind, which we think of more in terms of reason or logic. And obviously we know that's not actually the case. When it comes to feelings, we know that our actual hearts beating in our chests have nothing to do with them. It's just an organ pumping blood. Feelings are generated and regulated in the brain, just as much as memories or knowledge or reason would be. But we tend to differentiate between the head and the heart. The head is what we know, but the heart is somehow deeper than that.

Kind of takes on the same role in Scripture. The heart isn't just a beating organ, but the very core of one's being. Take one verse from Deuteronomy, one of the two verses that Jesus cites when he's asked what is the greatest commandment: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one. Love the Lord with all your...heart...and with all your soul and with all your strength."

And that first proverb we read is very much in the same vein. The heart is centrally important. Proverbs 4:23: "Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it." Everything you do flows from the heart, says this proverb, so we need to take special care of it.

Now that sounds kind of inspirational, doesn't it? Guard your heart, above all else, because everything you do flows from it. Kind of uplifting, if you ask me.

But then the rest of the proverbs we read kind of take a different turn.

12:25: "Anxiety weighs down the human heart, but a good word cheers it up." That's a bit heavier I guess, but at least it talks about the good word cheering it up.

Then 14:10: "The heart knows its own bitterness, and no stranger shares its joy." Now where did that come from? That sounds more like a line from some goth metal song. "The heart knows its own bitterness"? What's going on here?

And finally, 14:13: "Even in laughter the heart is sad, and the end of joy is grief." Well when you put it that way, now I really am sad. I'm thinking Simon and Garfunkel's "Sound of Silence" here, "Hello darkness, my old friend..."

Now as we were reading those, you might have thought, whoa, where did these come from? Starts off all promising with talk about guarding your heart because everything flows from it, and then it turns into this black shades on the mirrors, sadness in laughter stuff.

But the thing is, these verses, these proverbs, even though they're not all the times that Proverbs talks about the heart, they're pretty representative. In fact, when it comes down to it, when Scripture across the board talks about the heart, that centrally important core of life and being, it tends not to be as inspirational as it is *suspicious*. Take this one for example: "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick" (Jeremiah 17:9). Not exactly high on the qualities of the human heart.

Now you might be thinking, hold on. I thought the heart was where good things were supposed to come. So if this is sounding a bit off to you, it might be because we have been bombarded with a message to the contrary.

So, at home we're at the phase that we're getting a steady stream of kids shows and kids movies. We've got the Disney Plus thing so we're going through a lot of these old Disney animated movies, movies that I thought were incredible when I was a kid. But as I'm watching them, you know with our boys, a thread keeps popping up, about the heart, that I'm only now noticing. Here's an example.

Aladdin takes Princess Jasmine on a magic carpet ride. Cue the romantic music, and he sings these words to her: "I can show you the world; shining, shimmering, splendid" then here's the part to pay attention to, "Tell me, princess, now when did you last let your heart decide?" "Let your heart decide."

And if you think that's just a recent thing, let's go back in the vault and listen to the immortal words of Jiminy Cricket from Pinocchio: "When you wish upon a star makes no difference who you are. Anything you heart desires will come to you. If your heart is in your dream, no request is too extreme. When you wish upon a star as dreamers do." The message in both being, if you feel something deeply enough, then that will tend to be the right way to go, and you'll get what you want, and that's what's best.

In other words, just listen to your heart. Follow your heart. Does that sound familiar now? Have you heard that elsewhere? Because let me tell you, that is *everywhere*. It's like if any show or movie or song wants to give it some pseudo-spiritual wisdom, just add a line about following your heart.

But here's the thing. If we take these words from Proverbs seriously, and more broadly if we take how Scripture speaks about the state of the heart seriously, then following our hearts might not necessarily be something we should do so quickly. What if our hearts aren't what we should be following?

That seems to be behind what these Proverbs are saying. A heart can become anxious, pushed down by the burdens of life. A heart knows its own bitterness. Even in laughter the heart is sad. The heart is where everything in life comes from, but what if that source becomes tainted? Common thread there is, left to our own devices, left on our own, the human heart is not in and of itself a warm, welcoming, healthy place, so why would we want to follow that, or listen to that?

Now don't get me wrong. Let's not run home and cancel our Disney Plus subscriptions and burn our Frozen DVDs just because of this. I'm not calling for a boycott or anything. I only raise that because it's something that we hear over and over again: that the answers that we seek, about life, about anything, lie inward, and if we just look inside ourselves, into our hearts, we'll find them. What these proverbs seem to be saying is, "No, actually not. Not by ourselves anyway."

What should we do instead? If this book is all about wisdom and seeking wisdom, if we're not "listening to our hearts," where do we turn to?

That first proverb we read, Proverbs 4:23 offers something more to chew on: "Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it." Notice it doesn't say, "Above all else, *listen* to your heart." But "*Guard* your heart." It's acknowledging that the heart can steer us wrong, especially if our hearts are left on their own.

But what if they weren't? What if we didn't leave ourselves to our own devices? I offered earlier that one of the big points throughout Proverbs is that wisdom is first and foremost about fearing, or revering the Lord, about a life aligned with God's purposes, not our own. So if we want to talk about *guarding* our hearts, what would it look like if our hearts were aligned with God's?

I expect a lot of things would change, but for one we would give up on this fantasy that the answers simply lie within ourselves, within our hearts, plain and simple. We'd stop buying the lie that the solution is for each person simply to rely individually upon him- or herself. Because something else these Proverbs tell us about the heart is that it can be a lonely place, left on its own. "Anxiety weighs down the human heart, but a good word cheers it up." If we are to align ourselves with God's wisdom, we can't do that on our own.

Our staff is in the middle of reading a book by the German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Some of you may have heard of him, but he ministered in Germany during the rise of the Nazi regime. The book we're reading is called *Life Together*, all about how Christians could and should share...life together.

Here's one thing he says: "The Christian needs another Christian who speaks God's Word to him. He needs him again and again when he becomes uncertain and discouraged, for by himself he cannot help himself without belying the truth. He needs his brother man as a bearer and proclaimer of the divine word of salvation. He needs his brother solely because of Jesus Christ. The Christ in his own heart is weaker than the Christ in the word of his brother; his own heart is uncertain, his brother's is sure." The Christ in his own heart is weaker than the Christ in the word of his brother; his own heart is uncertain, his brother's is sure, meaning the Christ I would know on my own, isolated, holds nothing compared to the Christ that others testify to, not because others may know Christ more closely than I do, though that's certainly often the case, but because through the grace and mystery of the Spirit, we are drawn closer to Christ when we draw closer to each other.

For some reason when I think of a wise person, the image of some guru spending years in isolation meditating in silence and solitude comes to mind, and you cross oceans and climb mountains to see this sage and gain wisdom. That's an image that can come to mind for me.

But if these proverbs mean anything to us, if we are to guard our hearts, if we are to align our ways with God's wisdom, then that guru across the ocean and on top of the mountain isn't who we should turn to. It means we should turn to either side of us. It means we need each other. It means I need you, you need me, and you need you. The Christ in my heart is weaker than the Christ in your word.

I love what Mark and his team have been putting together with our LIFE Groups set to start when we launch the program year. One focus we realized is a need for us to reconnect after a long time apart, so we're going to be focusing on getting every single person in our church connected in a small group setting of some kind. And I hope that if you're not already in such a setting, that you would consider joining one. Not just because you'll learn this or that thing, not just because it could be good company. Hopefully it'll be those things, but more than that, our hearts need it. If we are to guard our hearts, our hearts need each other, for that's where the Lord draws us.

And if we do that, we find in God's wisdom that we are not left to our own devices, our own bitterness, our own sadness, but rather a heart that's somehow shared, and everything flows out of it.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.