

GUARD YOUR HEART

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I love reading the Book of Proverbs—for a lot of reasons. It contains down-to-earth, real-life smarts. It's full of short, pithy, bits of Holy Spirit-inspired wisdom. It teaches discernment and discretion. It inspires faithfulness and integrity. It grounds my faith journey in everyday living.

There are 31 chapters in the Book of Proverbs, which makes it fitting to read through it once each month (one chapter a day). It's a great habit, especially for young people (to teach them wisdom), but also for older people (to remind us to be wise). And today, being the first day of the month, is a great day to begin!

But to provide context, we'll begin with the words of Paul, from his letter to the Ephesians (5:15-18; CJB):

¹⁵ Therefore, pay careful attention to how you conduct your life—live wisely, not unwisely.

¹⁶ Use your time well, for these are evil days. ¹⁷ So don't be foolish, but try to understand what the will of the Lord is.

¹⁸ Don't get drunk with wine, because it makes you lose control. Instead, keep on being filled with the Spirit.

There is nothing new under the sun! Two thousand years ago, the days were evil. In challenging and threatening days like ours, we should listen to the Spirit's guidance all the more.

- Look carefully (circumspectly) at how you conduct yourself.
- Make the best use of the time you have.
- Don't be foolish, but be wise, trying to discern God's will.
- Don't get drunk, but be filled with the Spirit of Christ.

You may have heard of the baptism with the Holy Spirit. It's a common theme in Pentecostal churches like ours, because it's what makes us Pentecostal. It was on the Day of Pentecost (in Acts, chapter two) that the Holy Spirit first filled the early members of the Church. The initial signs of that occasion (especially, speaking in unlearned languages of men and angels) have had a lot of airtime, and stirred a lot of curiosity, and some reaction.

I am content in the knowledge that God gives His Spirit to His people, and that all of us may be (and should be) filled with the Spirit, as Paul wrote. And I believe (from personal experience) that "speaking in other tongues" is one of the most wonderful, powerful gifts that Christ gives His people.

Ongoing Evidence

But I am more interested, as you should be, in the ongoing evidence of spiritual fullness. Too many have presumed “once filled, always filled.” That is simply untrue. In fact, Paul’s words clearly refute that notion, for what he actually wrote was this: “Be continually being filled.” The verb tense he used describes an action once begun, and persistently repeated to the present time. We should be filled with the Spirit again, every day.

Okay, then. But beyond that initial experience, what is meant by “be filled with the Spirit”? What does that look like? How can I cultivate spiritual fullness? If I have been filled, will I “leak”? What activities support the Spirit’s fullness in me? Do any activities diminish it?

For some practical answers to these common questions, we’ll turn to the Book of Proverbs, chapter four. At first glance, these verses may not seem to address the questions I just mentioned, or even the subject of spiritual fullness. But if you’ll walk with me attentively through this passage, I think I can lift a veil and show you wonderful truth.

Our first clue is this: the Holy Spirit is the Author of the Scriptures. Men wrote the books, but the inspiring Author behind their thoughts and words was the Holy Spirit. That’s how their words became God’s words.

Yet the life and power of God’s words are not in the words themselves, for many have acquainted themselves with the Scriptures without acquainting themselves with God our Savior. God’s life and power come *through* those words, when they are read with the Spirit’s help and illumination.

Choose Carefully; You’re Gonna Pay

So the wise man said:

Proverbs 4:20 My son, pay attention to what I am saying; incline your ear to my words.

²¹ Don’t let them out of your sight, keep them deep in your heart;

²² for they are life to those who find them and health to their whole being.

Pay attention. Listen attentively. If you won’t pay attention today, you’ll pay the consequences tomorrow.

How do you pay attention to the Word of God? (1) Keep His words *before* your eyes. And, (2) guard His words *within* your heart.

(1) Read your Bible. Not just for information about God and His actions, but for understanding of His heart and mind. You may learn nothing new from today's reading, but you can still encounter God and be filled with His Spirit! Just give Him your *undivided* attention.

(2) Treasure God's words, and guard them as you would a box full of gold. We have an enemy who wants to steal God's words from your thoughts before you can plant them in your heart. Failing that, he wants to quench the fire of God's words in your life through distractions. Don't let others' words distract you. Don't let other ideas lead you astray.

What difference does it make when you pay attention like this?

Keeping God's words within your heart makes them a source of life and healing. That's eternal life forever and ever, and also a blessed life here and now. That's spiritual and emotional and physical healing.

Then, the wise man emphasized the significance of this guardianship:

Proverbs 4:23 Above everything else, guard your heart; for it is the source of life's consequences.

Don't let any enemy sneak in to steal or vandalize. *You* are the guardian of your own heart. Your history with God can't do that for you. Your church won't do that for you. Your pastor can't do that for you. *You* are to guard your heart, and God's words within it, with *all vigilance*, as a watchman's duty.

Why? Because of the *value* of its contents! Because of the *potential* of its contents!

The Hebrew word *tots'ot* means "outgoings." It is used here for starting points, like a fountain-head, and so the translation "sources" works well.

But it is the *outflowing* of those sources of life that is noted and therefore to be guarded.

Do you see the connection to the Scripture reference Jesus made when He said (John 7:38), "*From your innermost being shall flow rivers of life-giving water*"? John commented about this (John 7:39), "*He said this about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were going to receive.*" (And now we are back to the subject of the fullness of the Spirit.)

Isn't your heart the seat and throne and residence and workshop of the Holy Spirit within you? And aren't His tools the words of God that you have embraced in faith?

On Your Guard

How then shall we guard our hearts? There are *three gates* that you must guard. Gates allow penetration, as well as expression. Your *output*, as well as your intake, must be guarded. (For

instance, we often think that “venting”—whether our opinions or our anger—will “get it out of our system,” but allowing yourself to vent, creates instead an habitual response.) The three gates that must be guarded are: your mouth, your eyes, and your feet.

So, the wise man continued:

Proverbs 4:24 Keep crooked speech out of your mouth, banish deceit from your lips.

²⁵ Let your eyes look straight ahead, fix your gaze on what lies in front of you.

²⁶ Level the path for your feet, let all your ways be properly prepared; ²⁷ then deviate neither right nor left; and keep your foot far from evil.

The Mouth Gate

When it comes to the Mouth Gate, know this: Crooked, perverse speech should not be permitted to escape. That includes willful, contrary, violent speech (speech that is designed to “get a reaction,” stir up controversy, start an argument, malign another person).

Paul elaborates on this theme in his letter to Timothy (1 Timothy 6:4-5):

⁴ Such a person has an unhealthy desire to quibble over the meaning of words. This stirs up arguments ending in jealousy, division, slander, and evil suspicions. ⁵ These people always cause trouble. Their minds are corrupt, and they have turned their backs on the truth.

And again (Ephesians 5:4): *“Obscene stories, foolish talk, and coarse jokes—these are not for you. Instead, let there be thankfulness to God.”*

Devious and deceitful speech is unhealthy, because it is intended to mislead or misinform. It is patently false in its purpose, even if its content is true. Don’t let such words escape your lips! Guard the output of your heart through the Mouth Gate.

The psalmist made it his prayer (Psalm 141:3): *“Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth; Keep watch over the door of my lips.”*

The Eye Gate

When it comes to the Eye Gate, the wise man said, “Look straight ahead.” This means don’t let your eyes wander. It’s not safe when driving, and it’s not safe when living.

Job said (Job 31:1), *“I made a covenant with my eyes not to look with lust at a young woman.”* The “lust of the eyes” is not limited to sexual attractions. Some of us need to make that cove-

nant regarding material goods—cars, tools, technology, and clothing. The things, in themselves, are not evil, but marketing is designed to attract your attention, and you need to give your strongest and longest attention to the words of God, because they bring life and health.

So, guard your Eye Gate from frequent and mesmerizing distractions. You know what things are “eye candy” for you. Look away.

Set limits. Turn off the TV. Close your Internet browser. Start your day with the Bible and prayer, before other things can grab your attention. Sometimes, I still need to remind myself, “No Bible, no breakfast.”

The Foot Gate

Finally, when it comes to the Foot Gate, the wise man said, “Level the path you walk.” This is something *you* must do—it won’t be done for you. You make your path level by considering it carefully in advance. This admonition is about preparation, establishing order (as much as lies with you). This can only be done by pausing to think and plan.

You can plan to avoid evil. You know certain situations or relationships that typically challenge you. If you cannot avoid them, at least thoughtfully prepare for them—how you will respond, what reactions you will hold in check, words you might use, body language to avoid.

When you make a plan to avoid evil (especially, in the output from your heart through the Foot Gate), you will make your way safer, healthier, and more secure.

Did I say this would be easy? No. Jesus said (Matthew 7:13-14), *“The highway to hell is broad, and its gate is wide for the many who choose that way. But the gateway to life is very narrow and the road is difficult, and only a few ever find it.”*

Claim Your Rewards

What, then, are the rewards for such forethought and effort?

Life and health, in the Spirit’s fullness! The regular awareness of God’s presence in your life. The frequent observance of God’s providential care. A life-giving flow from within you. More answers to prayer. More zest for life. More energy with which to live it.

You cannot make God do anything for you by the efforts you make to please Him. But, neither can you appreciate the grace and glory of God in your life, if you don’t make the effort to give Him your best.

It’s not the result of works, but it is the result of faith-that-works.