

Proverbs 4:20-5:23 // Guard Your Heart

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 05 July 2026

Preacher: Darren Jackson

[0 : 00] We're in Proverbs, beginning in Proverbs chapter 4, verse 20, and we're going to the end of chapter 5. My son, pay attention to what I say. Turn your ear to my words. Do not let them out of your sight. Keep them within your heart, for they are life to those who find them and health to one's whole body.

Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it. Keep your mouth free from perversity. Keep corrupt talk from your lips.

Let your eyes look straight ahead. Fix your gaze directly before you. Give careful thought to these paths for your feet, and be steadfast in all your ways.

Do not turn to the right or to the left. Keep your foot from evil. My son, pay attention to wisdom. Turn your ear to words of insight, that you may maintain discretion, and your lips may preserve knowledge.

For the lips of the adulterous woman drip honey, and her speech is smoother than oil. But in the end, she is bitter as gall, sharp as a double-edged sword.

[1 : 17] Her feet go down to death. Her steps lead straight to the grave. She gives no thought to the way of life. Her paths wander aimlessly, but she does not know it.

Now then, my sons, listen to me. Do not turn aside from what I say. Keep to a path far from her. Do not go near the door of her house, lest you lose your honour to others and your dignity to one who is cruel.

Lest strangers feast on your wealth and your toil enrich the house of another. At the end of your life, you will groan when your flesh and body are spent.

You will say, how I hated discipline, how my heart spurned correction. I would not obey my teachers or turn my ear to my instructors, and I was soon in serious trouble in the assembly of God's people. Drink water from your own cistern, running water from your own well. Should your springs overflow in the streets, your streams of water in the public squares, let them be yours alone, never to be shared with strangers.

[2 : 29] May your fountain be blessed, and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth, a loving doe, a graceful deer. May her breast satisfy you always. may you ever be intoxicated with her love.

Why my son be intoxicated with another man's wife? Why embrace the bosom of a wayward woman? For your ways are in full view of the Lord and he examines all your paths.

The evil deeds of the wicked ensnare them, the cords of their sin hold them fast. For the lack of discipline they will die, led astray by their own great folly.

Amen. Thanks, David. Let's pray together. Father, I pray that as we hear these words from long ago, written primarily from a father to a son, that you would speak to us tonight as a father to your children.

Would you help us to know what it is you're saying to us through your spirit, so that we may live in full view of who you are as father, son, and Holy Spirit. I ask that in Jesus' name. Amen.

[3 : 40] There's a lot in this passage tonight, and don't worry, we're not going to go through every single bit of it, but I'd encourage you as you read the book of Proverbs, that it's given us a framework, as it says, for wisdom so that we can consider all aspects of life, not just for ourselves, but how God has told us to live in the world.

And at the core of the book of Proverbs is the idea that wisdom essentially depends on trusting God. And that leads to life in the fullest. And it contrasts it regularly with the fool.

The fool is this not just a silly person, it's somebody who's moving away from the pathways of how God has described things, and that leads to death and destruction. And at the core of Proverbs is this one verse, chapter one, verse seven, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of all wisdom.

Now, the word fear is not about terror, it's about a sense of reverence and awe before God, which makes our place in the universe clear that we are not God and God is in charge.

And God has designed things to be in a particular way. It's a mindset that recognizes that while we're not God, we also don't get to make decisions about right and wrong ourselves. The fear of the Lord is a posture of humility before God, embracing his definitions of good and life, and his definitions of evil, even when it's inconvenient and difficult, as some of tonight might be.

[4 : 59] And in the chapters we're looking at tonight, we find this series of speeches, as I said, from a father to a son. This father is telling his son not just to listen to wisdom, because it's good, but he needs to guard it, he needs to keep it in his heart, and he needs to protect it.

And this will require lots of different ways of how he lives in the world. But the father also consistently warns the son not to pursue foolishness and evil, because it will lead to shame and destruction.

And one of the key ways we're going to think about tonight is particularly the verses in chapter four around the wisdom of the heart. So in verses 20 to 23, he says, My son, pay attention to what I say. Turn your ear to my words. Do not let them out your sight. Keep them within your heart, for they are life to those who find them and health to one's whole body. Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.

It's an appeal not just to listen, but to keep and pay attention. There's lots of language throughout Proverbs of pay attention, listen, keep reminding over and over again. He's making the point that this thing might be easy to forget.

[6 : 05] And no other than just remembering in his mind, he has to keep it in his heart. For that is where he'll find life. It's life to those for the whole body. And wisdom that has been shared here has to be internalized, has to be kept in the heart.

Now the Hebrew word for heart is not often the way we use that word. It means far more than just your emotions, like putting your heart into something. It's the deepest part of a person.

It's the place where your desires, your loves, your thoughts, your intentions, your actions, it was the seat of the whole person. When you read the word heart in the Old Testament, it's not just what you feel, it's the center of who you are as a person, where everything flows from it.

And one of the key questions you find throughout the scriptures is, where is the heart of God's people? Is the heart of God's people given to their father, their creator, who set things out to be the way they have?

Or are they wandering? Are their hearts wandering after other gods and other idols all the time?

Verse 23 tells us, it's not just to guard our heart, because everything you do flows from the heart.

[7 : 10] Everything you do flows from the heart. Our inner realities, what goes on inside in our minds and our heart, is what shapes who we are in the world. External behavior is very important, and chapter five has a lot of that.

But what goes on in the heart, what we love, what we give ourselves to, that's the thing that shapes how we live in the world today. And we're told to guard that. The heart shapes your desires, and your desires shape your habits.

Your habits shape your character, and your character shapes how you live in the world. The command to guard your heart means to take the deepest part of who you are and guard it, look after it, to protect it, because it's easily influenced by other things.

It's because of where you're formed. To be guarding your heart means to be intentional about how you let things in that shape your desires, your attention, and your imagination. Because your life overflows from what goes on in the heart.

If you've read any of the scriptures, this is something Jesus gets at quite a lot with the religious teachers of the day. He's like, your heart's actually could be all over, your external behavior can be fine, but what's going on in your heart is far from God.

[8 : 21] Now one of the challenges when we talk about the heart and think about the heart and these ideas of competing desires is that our desires are often in conflict with one another, and no mine are. Even in the most simplest form, like when I go into the summer, I have these bizarre expectations of my life.

One of them you might not think is I'm going to get healthier. You might not think that as you look at me, but that's one of the ones I'm going to do. But then I also find myself in America two weeks ago ordering smash burgers at 11pm. And those desires are in complete conflict with one another

because the desires I have in the immediacy of my life can sometimes override this other desire about who I want to be in the world.

And it's not a phrase I've heard recently that helped me think about this, is that our strongest desires, the ones that immediately present themselves to us, are rarely the deepest, truest ones. So I have a desire in my life to regularly follow Jesus, but my heart is easily influenced by other things. The strongest desires I experience, the things that appeal to my heart the most, the loudest ones, are impulsive things, often for validation, for comfort or control.

They're highly reactive to my immediate scenarios, and often short term. But the deepest desires, the ones that are more core to who we are, the ones that God has put in our hearts, they're often harder to identify and name.

[9 : 42] So we can have strong desires, as I said, in that kind of slightly silly example, but we can have the desire to accumulate wealth or status, things that will mask our deeper desires for security and acceptance, something that can only ever be found in a relationship with Jesus.

This is the stuff of the heart that Jesus wants to get to, and he tells us to guard this place because it's his. He wants it. And in Proverbs, we're having a father tell you, he said, to look after your heart. It will inform who you become and how you live in the world. It's why it's so important to protect it in verse 23. Guard it. It's not telling people to become emotionally closed off or fearful, to have a hard heart.

That's never what the scriptures are aiming at. But instead, to guard your heart means creating conditions where it is God's, that is given to God and that he speaks to it and it is protected and it brings life because of the source giver of life and the way he's designed us to be.

The goal of guarding your heart isn't about self-protection. It's about to give your heart to God because he has already claimed it as his own. And this is, as I said, a challenge throughout the scriptures.

[10 : 51] In Amos, actually, the prophet says, that God says to the prophets, I don't care about your worship because your heart is far from me. It's Psalm 59, F51, sorry, tells us that a broken and contrite heart, spirit, that God will never reject.

Guarding your heart means guarding your love, guarding the place that God is at the highest of our desires and the other different things that will come in and influence that. We have, the son is being told to protect that because not just because it's a good idea, because of who you are in the world and who you are as being formed into the likeness of who God has made his people to be will be impacted by that.

And that is wisdom. That is true wisdom. None of our hearts are neutral. Our hearts are all over the place all the time. And to have our hearts be driven by the Father, driven by God, means we have to guard it and protect it and steward it in the same way we would do with anything fragile, important in our lives.

We wouldn't treat it passively. We wouldn't treat it unimportantly. We'd look after it. We'd steward it because it's a source of life. Wisdom is knowing that there are certain things that will lead our hearts and therefore our behaviours to either towards honouring God and loving him and there are other things that lead us in the opposite direction.

And I think you then start to see in verses 24, 25, 26 and 27 different aspects of what it means to guard your heart. The writer then gives some specific areas where we're encouraged to be proactive in how we guard your heart.

[12 : 24] So verse 24, keep your mouths free of perversity, keep corrupt talk far from your lips. She talks about speech, the kind of language we use and Proverbs makes clear that throughout the crooked speech points to one of the pathways of the wicked.

It's the opposite of wisdom. So guarding the heart includes guarding against any speech that contains language that is contrary to God's love. Now Proverbs actually tells you in chapter 6 what some of this means.

It says, some verses from chapter 6, a troublemaker and a villain who goes about with a corrupt mouth, who winks maliciously with his eye, signals and his feet when motions with his fingers, who plots evil with deceit in his heart.

He's always stirring up conflict, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked schemes, feet that are quick to rush into evil, a false witness who pours out lies and a person who stirs up conflict in the community.

Again, this is far more than just, well, just monitor your language so you're all saying nice things all the time. It's the stuff of the heart. Is it people who seek to sow division and conflict or is it people who speak life and unity into community?

[13 : 37] Verse 25, let your eyes look straight ahead you, fix your gaze directly before you. And the idea that the eyes should look directly forward is about, again, it's about a commitment to the kind of things we look at and the kind of people we want to become.

And it suggests that when a person turns his eye away from the path, he's apt to stumble, he is open to being knocked about. And again, this is about a motive and aim for who we want to become.

This isn't just about what we watch, of course it includes that, but like the vision we have about the life in front of us. Like often, what's going on in my heart is revealed by what I daydream about and how much of that is revealed about the kingdom of God and who Jesus says he is and how much of it speaks to some of the stuff I worry about, which can be good and true, but it is actually that reveals some of where my sight is and where it is not.

Verses 26 and 27, what you think about, give careful thought to the path for your feet and be steadfast in all your ways. Do not turn to the right or the left. Keep your foot from evil.

In order for the heart to be formed in wisdom, we need to recognize and stay in the path that will shape it further in the ways of righteousness, of goodness, of wisdom. Do not swerve to the right or the left.

[14 : 58] Where are we heading? What are we doing with our actions? Are we considered? So much of my life is just reactive to the next thing right in front of me. I suppose, am I considering my ways? Am I considering my paths? And do they fit with wisdom and who God has called me to be in this world?

In all these areas of life, something has gone on in our hearts that makes us want to pursue what Proverbs would call foolishness instead of true life that can only be found in relationship with God. So guarding the heart means considering these things, paying attention to these things, talking about these things, praying about these things with one another. Guarding the heart means fiercely protecting what you trust and love the most.

And for us, if you're a believer in Christ, we trust and love the most Christ because he gives himself to each and every single one of us to give us a new heart, to claim us as new people for himself. And therefore says, trust me above anything else your heart would wander after. But to do that, to be disciples of Christ, you need to guard your heart, to look after it, protect it. And here's some of the many ways in which that can be led astray.

[16 : 04] I think one of the tragedies I probably had when I was younger as a Christian is I believed that in order to be acceptable to God, I had to hide my heart. That there was a pile of things going on in my heart and I needed to hide it away and just ignore it.

Ignoring your heart is not guarding your heart. Guarding your heart is bringing it into the vision and the light of Christ and letting him say what is good and right and wise. And that will involve correction and keeping us in a different kind of path as opposed to foolishness, which is pursuing all the different other ways we could live.

Bringing our hearts regularly into the light before God and one another and in doing so you're protecting and guarding and nurturing the heart. And it's based, as I said, on a promise that Jesus is doing that with us.

He is creating in us a new heart, a new set of desires as Ezekiel says. Now all of that is how we think about the heart in general and a lot of what Proverbs, I feel, does is it takes different aspects of life and we were thinking about some of them last week and he presents these different aspects of life, whether that be money or anger and thinks, what does wisdom look like here?

What does wisdom look like here? And one of the ones we have tonight in chapter 5 where we spend the remainder of our time is thinking about the areas of sex, sexuality and temptation which, as soon as you start saying things like that in church, I can feel myself even being a bit awkward but we're going to do it because that's what the scriptures talk about.

[17 : 26] And the section starts by introducing this character called the immoral woman. Now it's important to remember that this is written instruction from a father to a son in the ancient world and would have been used in the training of young princes and that in the same way the author will personify wisdom so later the author will talk about wisdom as a woman.

He's personifying and using as a metaphor some deeper ideas about the subject he's talking about here. This, just to be clear, is not to be read as men be careful you know what women are like. This is not supposed to be some sort of sexist document from the past but neither is exclusively something therefore that is written to just heterosexual men. The principles we find in here are principles of wisdom for all of life and the heart and so they apply to all of us wherever we may find ourselves and how you understand and experience yourself in the world.

Otherwise a lot of people could just dismiss this and that the chapter would not be applicable but the scriptures are applicable to every person and every time and every place. So the father then goes into this picture of the immoral woman and in verses 3 to 6 he personifies sexual temptation as alluring it draws you in but it's deadly.

He says the lips of the forbidden woman are flattering they drip with honey in verse 3 and her words are persuasive her speech is smoother than oil. But her words are also hollow and destructive in verses 4 to 6.

[19:00] It's a pretty vivid picture the author presents and paints but it's also how temptation works. Temptation isn't just merely an idea that pops into your head it creates an entire sensory experience.

Temptation isn't just would you like this instead it engages us what we see what we hear what we smell what we taste what we feel and appeals to all these different things and creates a picture of something that could be better it takes good things in the world and builds a picture of something and says this will be better than what God has to offer.

Advertisement companies have clued in in this amazingly I'm an absolute sellout for the Apple Corporation and anytime you buy a new Apple product or I buy it which is not very often the way they even package it is beautiful it appeals to the senses it's simple they know what they are doing they appeal to all and I'm like yes that will solve my life if I just have the newer one of those everything will be okay but you see like when we think about sin and sin and temptation being moved away from God to pursue foolishness you see it in the garden in Eden that when the story of the fall of man Eve noticed that the food was good for tasting it was pleasing to what she saw her sight it was desirable for gaining wisdom it appealed to the imagination and desire temptation always tells a compelling story through the senses of what we see around us and it takes things that are good and makes false promises promises that take our hearts away from God it's the opposite of having a guarded heart and I know I might be like and here's a whole chunk here but there's a lot in here

I think verses 7 to 14 is a whole section of what it looks like to guard your heart there's clear encouragement to stay away some of it's pretty basic it's like don't listen to it it's like honey it sounds good it feels good but don't listen to it it will take your heart away verses 7 to 8 we see themes from the end of chapter 4 that are repeated language about not departing wisdom about recognizing the right path and stay on it it's not ignoring it but it's like don't fall for the trap 9 to 10 is similar it describes the consequences of what it means if you pursue wisdom in this area the lures of the fiddled woman result in there's something that was meant for enjoyment meaning the loss of honour and life strength these things are kind of taken away and actually is left with an experience of regret and shame all this language is the opposite of wisdom it's the opposite of the flourishing of the whole person it's the opposite of how God wants us to live but to really deal with temptation as opposed to just well just don't do these things we need something more than rules alone we need a better story to live by which I think is where chapter 5 starts to take us as we end as we head into the end of chapter 5 into verses 15 to 20 here you get a brief but powerful presentation of the essentials of the biblical teaching on sexual ethics yet in doing so he uses some pretty explicit language in fact a lot of the imagery used in verses 18 and 19 according to Tim Keller

I have researched this is Hebrew poetic language for sex now again as I said this often makes us a little bit uncomfortable but Proverbs like a lot of the scriptures is not trying to shy away from the reality of life or how they sometimes speak about godly intimacy it's an incredibly positive high view of sexuality and intimacy there's neither shame nor prudishness here in how it's being talked about it's a celebration of pleasure in the right because God is not against pleasure what he is against is us defining pleasure and taking it off in our own direction and causing chaos sin and brokenness and dishonor to him but it doesn't mean he's against it but he's built us to be people who worship him ultimately now sometimes when the challenge is we don't really know how to talk about some of this stuff now don't mishear me this is not supposed to be like now go away and tell every single

person every thought that's not what this is about but if silence is our response to something that the world speaks so loudly about all the time then we might echo that in how we understand God [23:15] God knows what goes on in our hearts and like he says to Adam when Adam's hiding when he says where are you is an invitation to come out of the hidingness and be known by a God who already knows the desires of our heart and when we avoid honest conversations we're left in isolation and part of temptation is spiritual one of the things the devil has called is the tempter and one of the ways he does that is by isolating us and making us by ourselves there's a picture here of a high view of calling us into the light where God is not just saying well don't do this here's a picture of something better of something more true of something good Proverbs asserts that sexual pleasure is good but it must be confined to marriage that's what verse 16 and 17 are talking about should your springs overflow in the streets your streams of water in public squares that's about the giving away of yourself in public squares that might be Old Testament language for essentially things like one night stands is like no that is not the purpose of how we are to think about ourselves as humans let them be yours alone never let them be shared with strangers there's this call for like a unity and a giving away of one another within the context of something that is called love he sees being intoxicated with love this is not passive language about treating something like sex in a kind of low way that I think a lot of our society does at the moment it's about something that God has built and says this is a good thing so in terms of not doing this here's a picture of something more beautiful the scriptures have a high view of sex because they have a high view of humans we are made in the image of God we are made with dignity and worth and how we engage with one another therefore is part of that now that bigger picture doesn't just refine itself to like well here's a bad way of doing it and here's a good way of doing it it's a bigger story than all of that altogether it's a story of how he has made each and every single one of us to be as his children people he's called out of darkness and into the light to live in a new way one of the pictures

I've found really helpful over the years which weirdly is appropriate because in two weeks time this film's about to come out is so Christopher Nolan's The Odyssey will come out in two weeks if I'm a seller for Apple I'm also a seller for Christopher Nolan so I'll definitely be there at the premiere and in The Odyssey Odysseus who will be portrayed by Matt Damon I think one of the stories is he has to sail past the island of the Sirens do any of you know that story from Greek mythology the kind of mermaid sirens who sing this beautiful music on the rocks and it lures the sailors in and they crash and smash and they all die now Odysseus knows this is going to happen so to get past how he survives is he finds all the strongest men in Greece and he gets them to bind him to the mast so he can't move and then he gets the sailors and they plug their ears full of whack so they can't hear and they sail and the sirens start singing and the sailors can't hear what's going on because they're doing this and Odysseus can't leave because he's so boundly tight to the mast that he can't escape and he survives but he is both haunted and exhausted by the song of the sirens but later in the same story

I don't know if this will be in the film or not we're told of Jason the Greek hero he's the commander of the Argonaut army and he knows the sirens are out there too but this time he has a different method altogether he gets Orpheus who he gets on board who's one of the most talented and beautiful musicians in the whole of ancient Greece and instead of blocking everybody's ears Jason tells Orpheus as soon as you hear the siren song get out your harp and start playing music for us and so the sirens sing and then Orpheus starts playing his song and they can hear the sirens they hear the allure of their voices but compared to this new song they've heard this far more beautiful alluring song to their heart it doesn't win and so they sail safely hearing a different song a different music there are times I know definitely in my life that the only way to resist temptation is through external constraints commitment discipleship accountability having people ask me questions there's good things we need them but the strongest way you overcome a lesser desire is with a bigger one and the song of Christ to each one of his followers to each one of his children who says I give and lay down my life so these things that your heart chases after for meaning and significance you will never find them there they lead to death and destruction it's foolishness instead come to me all you who are thirsty all you who are hungry I will give you life it's a song that stops us heading in one direction it doesn't deny it doesn't pretend the sirens aren't there it doesn't be like oh I'm just going to pretend they're not here it sees it but hears a different song altogether that's why following Jesus isn't simply about saying no to temptation it's about inhabiting a truer story one of which God's vision for reality becomes way more compelling than any false or fake temptation that

something immediate can offer us often the immediate desires surround things like lust and sex and sexuality they're appealing to these deeper desires of things like feeling unseen or loneliness or anger might be these things of the heart and Jesus has a lot to say to those things desires for connection and worth and healing

Jesus said you cannot find those anywhere else other than in me he has plenty to say to the heart and so the more we gaze at Christ how do we listen to that song is we consider the person of Jesus we bring our hearts and all their confused desires in there we lay them before the throne of God and he says I know what's in there let me speak to your heart as we gaze at his character and the attributes of who Jesus is they're not just things for us to model they are how he is with each and every single one of us it brings us a new song that actually means regardless of our experience of something like sex or marriage which again this chapter 5 holds up a beautiful positive picture but actually becomes way more than that of how we live our lives Tim Keller says in his article The Gospel and Sex which if you have way more questions about that I'd recommend you read that or speak to anybody you see up front he says Christians are to choose between marriage and singleness not for the basic contemporary motive of personal fulfillment nor for the traditional motive of propagating family legacy rather they are to marry or to remain single on the basis of which they best makes a sign of the kingdom the kingdom of God the new reality that Jesus is ushered in where sin and slavery and the wanderingness of hearts do not define us anymore because we have a different king who's reorientating and making a new heart within each and every single person who takes on his life death and resurrection as their own we cannot make ourselves have a new heart that is impossible

[30 : 21] I've tried multiple times to be like if I put this action plan into place I put this action and they can be good things but if I miss the song of my saviour saying stop this and listen to me I am the only source of life it will constantly be wandering off in different directions the gospel frees us from needing things like relationships or we're built for relationships just to be clear but the way we see them in our culture we are to freely rejoice and experience the gift of God who is God himself who gives himself for each one of us therefore we're free to live as people who take our hearts guarded knowing they could be wavering all over the shop and we can only do that together together with a God who's with us and that's how the psalm of 139 David prays at the end search me God and know my heart test me and know my anxious thoughts and see if there's any offensive way in me and lead me in the life everlasting when verse 21 says for your ways are in full view of the Lord and he examines all your paths you can hear that as a threat or you can hear as an invitation an invitation for God to say bring your heart before me

I know what's in there he is not shaken by anything that's in there and instead asking him to lead us in paths of everlasting life let's pray together and then you'll come back up Father we know that our hearts are prone to wonder they regularly do it so would you help us to be people who pursue wisdom cultivating the loves and desires and affections that align with your truth a truth that starts with the reality that you Lord first loved us and you give yourself freely for each and every single one of us so we might be free from the consequences of the ways of the foolish life help us to do that in full union with you because you've taken us who are in Christ and named us as your own and gave us a new heart that's that in Jesus name Amen