

## Missio Dei Fellowship

We exist to make disciples who delight in God and make him know by proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ.

### Your Cheatin' Heart Proverbs 4:20-27

**Key Words:** heart, guard, life, diligence, deception

**SermonAudioBlurb:** As a biblical counselor I'm always talking about heart change. In this sermon I unpack Proverbs 4:23 with an eye to what guarding the heart looks like.

#### Introduction

Proverbs 4:20-27, esp, 4:23

#### I. What is Your Cheatin' Heart?

##### A. What the Heart is Not

1. Culturally speaking “the heart” refers primarily to the area of the heart we call feelings.
2. Phrases like “follow your heart” or “listen to your heart” are common and indications that we ought to follow our feelings where ever they lead us.
  - a. The popularity of pop psychology and the feminization of many churches have done much to entrench these notions in the church.
  - b. This in turn creates much confusion when people become aware that the biblical heart and heart created by psychology are two different things.
  - c. If I believe something to be true and someone challenges me with another truth I have to decide which is biblically true and for some the transition is hard and some never make it.
3. The visible expression of deep emotions like the feeling of love are supposed to reflect truth and are therefore, good”
  - a. This stems from the theological error that assumes that man is “basically good.”

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1. Note the responses we hear to mass murderers.
  2. “I can’t believe so-and-so did that. He/she had a good heart.”
  3. “He or she is obviously crazy” thus indicating there is something wrong with the mind/brain that caused the tragedy.
- b. This is in direct contradiction to the biblical view that presupposes mankind’s “badness.”
1. This basic fact is set down nicely in Gen. 6:5-8
  2. After the fall every single person born is born with the kind of heart described in verse 5.
  3. The picture is rather dismal since judgment follows.
  4. But so does hope as the undeserving Noah who also has a wicked heart finds grace in the eyes of the Lord.
- c. In the New Testament, Jesus identifies the heart as the source of all our troubles. (Luke 6:43-45)

### B. What the Heart is

1. Some theologians teach that man is three part creature.
  - a. Body, spirit, soul
  - b. To arrive at this, certain biblical texts are interpreted through a psychological lens.
    1. For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. (Hebrews 4:12 ESV)
    2. Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Thessalonians 5:23 ESV)

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3. John MacArthur, an expert in the Greek notes that passages like these emphasize wholeness or totality and are not meant to make distinctions between spirit and soul.
  - c. The Bible argues for a two part creature
    1. Immaterial/material
    2. Body/Soul
    3. Outer man/Inner man
    4. The heart is the inner man or the soul.

### C. What the Heart is made up of.

The heart is the inner man but there aspects of the heart that make up the inner man. For simplicity sake I'll briefly discuss five.

1. The interplay between the components of the heart.
  - a. The mind is the most important. The New Testament often equates mind with heart it's that important.
  - b. The mind is the rational/reasoning part of the heart that God has given us. The mind is the part that thinks.
    1. Emotions are the results of prior thinking that in turn are related to the desires of the heart as a whole.
    2. This week we had a major snowstorm. How you view snow in the first place and the importance of what it kept you from determines your resulting emotion. This is why some people experience joy or contentment with snow and others get angry or discouraged.
    3. The emotions are therefore reactionary. We are never passive to our circumstances. We react out of what we truly desire. What am I getting that I do not want? What do I want that I am not getting? The answers to these questions begin to reveal the heart.
  - c. The folly of an emotional decision.
    1. The jeep story
    2. The marriage story

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- d. The mind is the “intelligence officer.” The job of the mind is to gather intelligence, examine the facts, analyze them and interpret them biblically (if you are a Christian).
  1. The mind reasons, weighs pros and cons and sets the stage for what path to follow—the path of biblical wisdom or foolishness, the kingdom of God or the kingdom of self and heaven or hell.
    - a. The emotions are reactive. They are also God-given and they do a wonderful job of revealing what it is on the heart.
  2. Affections of the heart is the better way to understand emotions.
    - a. Affections of the heart determine what we love and what we hate. What the heart is “set upon.”
    - b. The Bible describes affections as wants, desires, passions or lusts. The affections of the heart can be obviously evil or subtly so, as a desire becomes a demand.
    - c. Obvious affections of the heart that are evil: lusts of the flesh that reveal a craving for pleasure or comfort, lust of the flesh that reveal a craving for control or power, lusts of the flesh that reveal a craving for approval.
    - d. Not so obvious affections of the heart that can become lusts--- things that we desire too much that become demands, wanting to be loved, respected, comfortable life or success.
  3. The will is the gatekeeper of the heart. It is the decision maker. I will or I will not.
    - a. The mind should inform the will and this means for the Christian the mind needs to be biblically informed.
  4. The conscience is the policeman.
    - a. In the opening illustration Hank Williams hoped that the conscience of the ex-wife would bother her.
    - b. A properly functionally conscience that has not been hardened will produce the emotion of guilt or shame. This means that a person realizes they have violated one of God’s standards or a standard of their own.

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- c. Conscience is something everyone has which is why it is critical that the mind is biblically informed with a sound theology.

### 5. The memory

- a. The memory is simply the librarian of the heart. It keeps records. This can be good or bad depending on how we use memories.
- b. We learn from our mistakes or we can use the memory in a evil way too. This is why the battle for the heart is often equated as a battle for the mind.

## II. How Does Your Cheatin' Heart Function?

### A. The Heart is a Cheater (Pro. 28:26)

1. The heart is a cheater. He who trusts in his own heart is a fool, But he who walks wisely will be delivered. Pro. 28:26, NASB (ESV-heart is mind)
2. We have to get our minds around the fact that our hearts cannot be trusted.
  - a. There is a side to every believer that simply should not be trusted especially by themselves. Affections of the heart can blind us to walking wisely; that is by trusting in God's Word for our source of truth.
  - b. This is why God established the church. He intends for us to live in community and the community functions best when he help one another guard the heart.
  - c. Being aware of our blind spots is one way we can help one another guard the heart. The heart is ready to cheat and it takes more than a self-policing policeman like a sinner like me to do it.

### B. The Heart is a Deceiver (Jer. 17:9)

Acknowledging Thomas Watson:

[http://www.gracegems.org/Watson/spiritual\\_watch.htm](http://www.gracegems.org/Watson/spiritual_watch.htm)

All of Thomas Watson's writings and sermons are replete with sound doctrine, practical wisdom, and heart-searching application. His profound spirituality, gripping remarks, practical illustrations, and beauty of expression make him one of the most irresistible of the Puritans. (Thomas Watson, 1620-1686)

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1. The cheatin' heart is a cheatin' heart because we are experts at shrinking our sin or rationalizing it.
  - a. Thomas Watson said "the [cheatin'] heart will tell us that sin is but small" and as a result of little to no consequence.
  - b. We praise God that our sins are forgiven and we realize that we battle sin that is forgiven and then turn right around and use these facts to rationalize the sin.
2. The cheatin' heart is an expert justifier.
  - a. Watson put it like this: "The heart will tell us that it is lawful to endeavor to preserve our reputation."
  - b. What Watson means is that there are many desires of the heart that are lawful, like having a good reputation. When the lawful desire is elevated to that of a demand we feel "justified" in obtaining that want or desire even if we have to sin to get it.
  - c. This perhaps is the area where the cheatin' heart is the most deceptive and the most subtle. The desire is lawful [or good] so it's easy to fall into pragmatism where the ends justify the means.
3. The cheatin' heart will settle for duty without affection.
  - a. Watson said "the [cheatin'] heart will deceive us about religious things—our duties and graces."
  - b. The cheatin' heart is deceptive when we start believing that God is impressed by our number of religious activities. I go to church on Sunday, I attend my weekly Bible study, I read some Scripture on my own and I even give to missions. The cheatin' heart is akin to the Pharisee who did lots of "right" things but whose hearts were far from Jesus. (Matt. 23:23-28)
  - c. Watson compared the duty bound Christian to one who looks in the mirror and the cheatin' heart buys the flattery it sees. Duty without delight is hypocrisy was his point. The cheatin' heart is deceptive as it allows us to get away with our hypocrisy.

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- d. “Do with the heart as you would do with a cheater. We will trust a cheater no further than we can see him. The heart is a grand cheater; it will supplant and delude; test it—but do not trust it. “ Thomas Watson

### III. Guarding the Cheatin’ Heart

#### A. We Guard that which we Treasure the Most

1. Think about what we guard.
  - a. We guard our homes and possessions.
  - b. We guard our children.
  - c. We guard our national security.
  - d. We guard that which we fear to lose. (Matt. 6:33)
2. Guard the internal treasure
  - a. The hypocrite is concerned only with externals and guarding them. For example, we can clean up our language and look good on the outside but the inner man knows the truth.
  - b. Guarding our lips is a good thing but setting a guard on our inner man means we grieve at the first sign of sin and then sets the heart at the Cross.

#### B. Guarding is Serious Business

Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life (Pro. 4:23, ESV)

1. Proverb 4:23 use the words “keep” or “guard” or “watch over” the heart in a diligent or vigilant manner.
  - a. In Roman times soldiers were detailed to guard prisoners. If a prisoner escaped the soldier would pay with his life. The case of the panic stricken jailer is a case in point. You can bet the soldiers were vigilant in their duties because the price of letting their guard down was high!

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1. Often times when a soldier was detailed to guard someone they were chained to the person. Their sole job was to guard the prisoner and they had no other duty while chained to him.
  2. We on the other hand are so busy guarding other things we have little time to guard that which is most important.
- b. Failure to guard the heart often brings very serious consequences.
1. Vigilance is the opposite of lazy. Generally speaking, you get a return on that which you invest in. If you do not invest time and effort in guarding your heart you will not get a return.
  2. Complacency is a sign that the heart is not guarded. The person with a complacent heart does not realize the preciousness of the heart nor the need to guard it with diligence.
  3. The redeemed heart should never be a complacent heart. The price of the redeemed heart was Jesus' death on the cross.
- c. Our jails are filled with people whose hearts desires knew few boundaries and as a result paid the penalties for violating the law.
1. Never think for a moment that you have a good heart. You may what is called a good-hearted person in that you are friendly and generous but it does not mean you have a good heart.
  2. It is more accurate to say I have a cheatin' heart that by the grace of God has been made new and with that heart I may represent my Lord and Savior.
- d. With every so-called addictive or bad habitual behavior there are repeated failures to guard the heart.
1. Be ruthless with your own sin but be patient with others. As a counselor I've met far too many people unwilling to go to war with their sin.
  2. You are in the army of the living God. The only way you lose is by giving up.
  3. Learn How People Change and change-fight for change and God will give you the grace to change.



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2. The Proverb equates the issue of guarding as a matter of life or death.
  - a. If the heart is the center of all things (Luke 6:45-48) then it certainly is a matter of life or death.
  - b. One Scottish preacher (Maurice Roberts) put it like this: “the way you end up in life will be absolutely determined by the way you keep, or fail to keep your soul.”
  - c. I found an interesting contrast in the Scripture where God rebukes too much attention being paid to the outer man and how he judged it.
    1. Peter (1 Pe. 3:3-4) is all about not letting beauty be external and it goes on to say that God looks at the inner beauty of the heart.
    2. Isa 3:18-24 equates this preoccupation with the external as the road to death.
  - d. God has always wanted the hearts of his people
    1. Pro. 23:26: My son, give me your heart, and let your eyes observe my ways.
    2. In Ezekiel 36:25-26 God makes a promise to cleanse his people from the worship of idols by giving them a heart of flesh and replacing the evil heart of stone they were born with.
    3. In Christ, this means the heart has a new capacity that it did not have before—the capacity to worship the one true God. (See 1 Cor. 5:17)
    4. In Col. 2:11-14 we see how this miracle takes place as God cuts away the heart of stone so that we now identify with Christ who gives us new heart motivations to desire him and to delight in him.
    5. Like Noah, those who have found favor in the eyes of the Lord are the same ones who have new hearts they did not have before and it’s all of grace.

### C. The Fear of the Lord is the beginning of Wisdom (Pro. 1:7)

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction. (Proverbs 1:7 ESV)

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1. There are shades of meaning in what it means to fear God but primary is the idea to esteem God highly. The fool who is by definition a poor watchman of the heart esteems self highly and so despises true wisdom.
  - a. 1 Cor. 1:30-31 says: “and because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption so that it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.” (ESV)
  - b. To esteem God highly is to esteem Christ highly. To Paul what this seems to mean, is for us to get over ourselves and pursue Christ.
  - c. This is “wisdom” and it is the powerful antidote for the cheatin’ heart.
  - d. It is love for Christ, who became sin for our sake that ultimately will bring about a changed heart in the sense that the heart is being sanctified.
  - e. God is in the heart change business and Jesus himself put it so simply that even a simple guy like me can understand it. He said (John 14:15) if you love me you’ll do as I say. If there is little to no desire for Christ in the first place there will be little doing as he said in the second. This is a sign of a heart that thinks it’s secure but could be badly mistaken.

### D. Guard the Gateway to the Heart

D.A.Carson writes:

The inner person has to be right, because that is the source of all else; but outward behavior is not just left to work itself out from that. We also have to pay attention to speaking straight (Pr. 4:24), looking straight (Pr. 4:25) and walking straight (Pr. 4:26) D.A. Carson, New Bible Commentary

1. The gate to our thought lives is primarily our eyes and ears.
  - a. What we see or read or listen to largely determines what we think.
  - b. This seems obvious and maybe it’s because it seems obvious it is neglected or we think we can handle it. The cheatin’ heart and the enemy of our souls will work to delude us into thinking certain things could never happen to us.
  - c. Jerry Bridges: “We must not allow that which panders to sexual lust, greed (called materialism in our present society) envy, and selfish ambition to enter our minds. We should avoid television programs, magazine or

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newspaper articles, advertisements, and conversations that arouse such thoughts. We should not only avoid them, but to use Paul's words to Timothy, "flee from all this." (The Practice of Godliness).

- d. Please do not hear this as an encouragement to develop a fool proof list of "do not's."
2. I will not set before my eyes anything that is worthless. (Psalm 101:3a, ESV)
    - a. Eyes can either let in light or darkness but they can also let in too many things which are in and of themselves just fine but if let in too much begin to obscure the light and in fact become darkness.
    - b. This is why the spiritual disciplines or the means of grace are important. Weekly worship, community groups with all the spiritual activities associated with them, personal devotion time.
    - c. We're tempted to let "good things" crowd out the means of grace and this often gives the cheatin' heart the chance it seeks to escape and go wild.
  3. Characteristics of the Guarded Heart
    - a. The guarded heart is the heart that is awake. If you've been sluggish or lazy in guarding your heart wake up to the danger and do something about it.
    - b. The guarded heart is the jealous heart. If the cheatin' heart chases other lovers then be jealous for Christ, the lover of your soul. Be ruthless in putting to death the idols that ensnare.
    - c. The guarded heart is the serious heart. Take the ministry of the Word seriously. It is not take it or leave it advice. The Word is nourishment for the soul and in it is life.
    - d. The guarded heart is the humble heart.
      1. "The humble heart is the *valley* where God delights to walk. The humble heart is the house where He will take up residence. The humble heart has a low esteem of itself—and a high esteem of others (Philippians 4:3). The more humble the heart is—the more fertile in grace it is; those meadows which lie *low* are the richest grounds. Keep your heart humble; view your own deficiencies—and others abilities. The *abscess of pride* kills. The eagle lifts up the tortoise into the air—

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and then throws it down upon a rock and breaks it. Just so, the devil lifts the heart up in pride—and so destroys it!” (Thomas Watson)

- e. The guarded heart is the heavenly heart. Set your minds on things above (Col. 3:1-2)
  1. Hiding the Word in the heart. (Psa. 119.11)
  2. Be part of the community of believers (the church)
  3. Identify and watch over those desires/passions most likely to run amok.
  4. Pray about those passions/desires. Luther said that prayer takes down the swelling of the soul—and abates the heat of inordinate affections. What this means is pray about your weaknesses. If you have a tendency to covet pray about it. If you desire the approval of people pray about it. If you have a lazy heart pray about it. Every single person in your community groups has a heart issue or two, be vulnerable enough to pray for yours and theirs. We all have the same problem.

If you would keep your heart, get Christ into your heart. Ephesians 3:17: "That Christ may dwell in your heart." Nothing can truly hurt us—but sin. If Christ is in the heart, He will purify it. His Spirit is the refiner's fire spoken of in Malachi 3:2. If Christ is in the heart, He will adorn it. He will bring in the rich furniture of His graces, and so beautify the hidden man of the heart. If Christ is in the heart, He will defend it; the castle of the heart can never be captured, if Christ is in it. Let Satan dig his mines, lay his snares and traps, and shoot his fire-balls of temptation—yet if the Lord Almighty pitches His tent in the heart, it can never be taken by storm!

### Questions for the Community Groups

1. Can you explain the relationship between the mind and emotions?
2. Can you explain how the cheatin' heart is a deceiver?
3. Where are you prone to give into the cheatin' heart?
4. What can you do to guard your heart in a more diligent manner?