

“Stewarding the Heart” | Proverbs 4:23 (Generosity)

**The Rev. Dr. Samuel D. Ferguson | The Falls Church Anglican
Preaching Draft | July 14, 2024
(Discussion questions on page 9)**

In his novel, *Moby Dick*, Herman Melville describes intense scenes from the life of 19th century whalers. One particular episode is called “the dart.”

The dart is when the large whaling ship spots a whale, and then lets into the water a small boat guided by several oarsmen. These oarsmen, along with one harpooner, navigate the water to get close to the whale. With the 50-foot behemoth moving below and atop the water, the scene is quite chaotic. These men are in what seems like a matchstick of a boat atop the bottomless Indian Ocean. And they must position themselves close enough to the whale that the lone Harpooner can hit his mark.

With the boat tossing and turning, the harpooner must stand to his feet and with precision and force, launch his harpoon—the dart—into the back of the giant mammal. The throw may cover 20-30 feet. The reader wonders how, in such circumstances, the harpooner can make his mark?

Melville answers—that there is a *secret to the dart*. The Harpooner must remain calm, crunched down, and entirely poised. And in a summer scene at the close of the chapter, Melville speaks it what sounds like a maxim:

To insure the greatest efficiency in the dart, the harpooners of this world must start to their feet out of idleness, and not from out of toil.¹

As good writers are apt to do, Melville draws from this real-life situation and universal truism that might be stated as this: *to act in life with precision and care, it helps to be operating from a heart that is healthy and able to stabilize.*

Today, in our final sermon in our stewardship series, we consider our hearts. Notwithstanding the chaos that churns around us, what does it mean to steward our hearts in such a way that—knowing that influence everything we do—they help us start to our feet from a pace of health and stability, not turmoil.

Here is how Solomon puts it in Proverbs 4:23:

“Above all, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it” (Prov 4:23 NIV). In the ESV, “Keep your heart above all else, for it is the source of life” (ESV); Or in the New Living Translation, “Guard your heart above all else, for it determines the course of your life” (NLT).

¹ Herman Melville, *Moby Dick or The Whale*, (Northwestern University Press, Evanston, Ill: 1988) p. 288.

Carefully considering this verse, we will suggest that stewarding our hearts requires three things: First, we must (1) Respect the Heart; second (2) Heal the Heart; and (3) Keep the Heart.

I. Respect

Solomon pays the heart great respect in this verse when he writes, “above all” we must guard it and then acknowledges its effects on all of life, “from it flow the springs of life.”

I want to take a moment and try and understand why the heart is so important.

With the Heart we *value—desire, love.*

First, the heart is the faculty by which we value, love, and desire. It’s our affective or emotive center. Notice in this larger passage that the father speaking to the son refers to several other faculties of the person:

Ears are inclined (v.20); eyes are focused (v.21); the mouth is put on watch (v.24), and the feet called to keep from swerving from the right or the left (v.26-27). This is something like an anatomy of discipleship.

But in the very center of the poem is the heart, and it is important above all else.

These other faculties speak of senses and abilities that we share with other creatures: *hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting, touching*. By them we take information into our selves. And by our body we may have initial feelings, or reactions to this information. But what the heart does, and what makes humans unique, is that the heart *values* things. The heart makes moral judgements, becomes inclined or disinclined toward something, attaches to it in love or repels in hate. And value transcends utility. It is our soul’s choosing and loving what we believe will make us happy, or what we see as worthy.

Natural instincts meet spiritual nature

And this is because the heart is that place in us where our natural instincts meet our spiritual nature.

God has put eternity into man’s heart (Eccl 3:11) writes Solomon in Ecclesiastes. And David likeneth his heart to his spirit, when he writes, “create in me a clean heart, O Lord, and renew a right spirit within me” (Ps 51).

This ability we have to value things, weigh them morally, and inwardly choose or reject them, is a key way we bear the image of God. Our heart is our inner orientation toward what we want, desire, love.

It is in the heart that we treasure God’s law (Ps 37:31); it is with the heart that we have faith, “for with the heart one believes” (Rom 10:10)—or, doubts, “The fool says in his

heart, ‘There is no God’” (Ps. 41:1); it is with the heart, that we love God, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart (Matt 22:37); it is into the heart, that Christ, by His Spirit, comes to dwell, Paul prays that “Christ may dwell in your hearts” (Eph 3:17).

This proverb tells us that this feature of us—this inward desiring and wanting and valuing—has tremendous influence on who we are and how we function. We must respect it.

Our Values influence everything

It also tells us that our valuing—our desires and deep inclinations—impact everything: “Keep your heart above all else, for it is the source of life”

Jonathan Haidt is a moral psychologist who has reflected much on how we come to our moral judgements. One of his central theses is that our heart’s intuitions—inward leanings—fire before our moral reasoning kicks in. He uses the image of an **elephant and a rider** to make his point. The **elephant** represents our deep, often sub-conscious inclinations—the leanings of our heart. The rider represents our **reasoning**.

Haidt writes:

If you want to change someone’s mind about a moral ... issue, *talk to the elephant first*. If you ask people to believe something that violates their intuitions [=heart’s movements], they will devote their efforts to finding an escape hatch—a reason to doubt your argument or conclusion. They will almost always succeed.” “when we see or hear about the things other people do, the elephant begins to lean immediately.”²

The way the Bible puts this would be to say that what the heart loves, the mind justifies and chooses. Here is how Jesus says it:

And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. ²⁰ For everyone who does wicked things hates the light.... (Jn 3:19-20).

The light speaks to the revelation of Jesus. Jesus is appearing right before their eyes, teaching them, showing them, he is the messiah. But they do not believe. Why? Not for lack of light—access to knowledge. But because “they love the darkness.” Their problem is not the mind, but the heart.

Paul reasons similarly in Ephesians, speaking of those who do not live according to God:

They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. (Eph 4:18).

Our problem is not ignorance, it’s heart-hardness

² Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, 59, 83.

This is why Solomon writes earlier in Proverbs, that the “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.” (Prov 1:7). Fear is a heart orientation of reverence and love toward God. This heart orientation is upstream from how the mind is able to grasp things.

Apply: Have you ever noticed that your heart—what you desire, love, fear—impacts what you are able or willing to understand? We often say that someone is just “too stubborn” to see they are wrong. What we mean is that their heart is so hardened by pride, or indifference, or fear, that they cannot hear the truth. What are the deep commitments in your heart that may be guiding you?

Are you aware of what your heart is leaning towards? What it is orientated towards? Is it selfward primarily—desiring and wanting things that promote its glory. Or is it godward?

II. Healing the Heart

We must now raise a concern, however. It seems that along with the hearts power, it turn out, in scripture, to be sick:

Jeremiah says “the heart is deceitful above all things, desperately sick; who can understand it?” (Jer 17:9).

I scanned the book of Proverbs and I could find about ten things that someone, or something, could do to our hearts: a person may incline their heart (2:2), keep/guard their heart (4:23), turn their heart (7:25), apply their heart (22:17), direct their heart (23:19); keep their heart from envy (23:17); good news can delight the heart (15:30); and oil and perfume can make glad or rejoice the heart (27:9).

But what stood out to me was what someone could not do to their heart: *purify it*. “Who can say, “I have made my heart pure; I am clean from my sin”? (Prov 20:9).

The Bible presents the heart as something that its owner cannot purify or soften. It is sick, sinful and hardened beyond our powers to remedy.

Salvation as Heart Transplant

Hence salvation is pictured in Ezekiel as a heart transplant. Israel is in exile and surrounded by external problems. But God’s ultimate solution is this:

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart.... I will remove the heart of stone (Ezek 36:25-26).

We have something wrong with us, in us. The whole world could be put to rights about us, and it wouldn’t heal our hearts.

The healing of the heart brings us to the Gospel, the Good News.

In Christ, God not only atones for the sins of our hearts. He brings us back into a reconciled relationship of love with him. And this tells us that two things must happen for the heart to be healed: forgiveness and embrace.

1. Forgiveness

The heart must be forgiven. It's debt, it's burden of sin, must be lifted.

People understand this intuitively. That they need to be cleaned. Jesus atones for our sin and releases the heart from guilt on the cross.

But that is not, in itself, enough to heal the heart.

2. Reconciliation

Because we are made in the image of a triune God, who exists eternally in a relationship of love between Father, Son and Holy Spirit—our hearts are not themselves by themselves. They are made to be loved. And loved by God. Thus, the heart must not only be forgiven, but embraced. It must be pardoned, but it must also be loved. Hence salvation in the Bible is not only described as forgiveness, but reconciliation—re-union of man with God.

How does this heal the heart?

E.g., Soldiers released and embraced: Consider a scene where ten prisoners of war are in ten cells, side by side. They hear over a loud speaker that they have been freed—the penalties set aside. They can go. The doors all open at once. The first nine men look out and see a person dear to them outside the door—a parent, a spouse, a friend—who is the one who searched far and wide to find them and bought their freedom. They run out and embrace them. They have not only been pardoned, but reconciled. Their hearts are at peace, healed.

But for the tenth man, he looks out and no one is outside his cell. Someone anonymous decided to pardon him, but just because. There is no friend, family member, loved one there to embrace him. He is pardoned, but he is not healed.

Forgiveness is only the first step in the Gospel. It opens the prison door of judgement and guilt *so that* we can run into the arms of our heavenly Father, into the arms of our savior and friend, Jesus Christ.

The heart can only be healed by the sacrificial love of God.

Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920)— a Dutch politician, statesman, and theologian who served as prime minister of the Netherlands from 1901-1905—writes in his devotional:

The homesickness goes out after God Himself, until in your soul's transport of love you feel the warmth of his father heart in your own heart. It is not the Name of God, but God Himself Whom your soul desires, and cannot do without, God Himself in the outshining of His life; and it is this outshining of His life that must penetrate you and must be assimilated in the blood of your soul.³

Apply—God's heart to heal your heart; keep Jesus as your bosom friend: are you trying to heal your heart by yourself? Or by what means? Have you set it before God?

In our relationships, we can sometimes ask another person to heal our hearts. We know that we need another heart to heal our heart. But let us not put this ultimate job on a mere mortal. Friends, whether in your marriage relationship, or your relationship with parents or adult children, or with your friends, remember that you ultimately need God's heart, to heal your heart.

[T] Finally, after the heart is healed, and we are aware of its power, what practical things can we do to participate in its upkeep?

III. Keeping the Heart

Text: Our passage uses a term that is sometimes rendered keep and other times guard. You might think of keeping a garden—sometimes that means keeping it up by watering and planting and trimming, and other times it means keeping it protected— from bugs, animals, or weeds.

So we must both put things into our hearts and keep things out. We can glean a few insights about this from the larger passage. Here is how we can keep the heart.

First, keep the Word of God in your heart.

My son, be attentive to my words; incline your ear to my sayings. ²¹ Let them not escape from your sight; keep them within your heart. ²² For they are life to those who find them, and healing to all their flesh. (4:20-22)

This means more than read the Bible. It means memorize it. Take portions of it into your heart and write it on the walls.

The Hebrew Bible will often use the term meditate, which has the sense in that language of a cow chewing the cud.

We need to remember that, as one writer puts it:

[The] religious approach to reading is quite distinct from the consumerist approach to literature that characterizes the modern world of the printed book and internet...You read what you like, when you like, and accept what you like in what you read. Then discard it

³ Abraham Kuyper, *To Be near unto God*, tr. John Hendrik de Vries (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1918, 1925), 675.

and move on to read something else . . . Because people in the ancient world memorized religious texts, they were able to meditate on [them] day and night.⁴

E.g., pride and humility: Let's say you want to guard your heart from pride and arrogance. What would you do? You might take this verse from Numbers 12:3 and put it to memory: "Moses was a very humble man, more humble than any man on the face of the earth (Num. 12:3)." Or you might take, "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth," in Matthew 5. Write this on a sticky note and put it on your fridge, or in your wallet, or on your desk: And when you see it, read it and chew on it and think: "Moses, with all that power, was the humblest man on earth. I want to be like that. O Lord, make me meek and humble." That is how meditation works.

Second, watch what you say.

Put away from you crooked speech, and put devious talk far from you. (4:24).

Our mouths speak from the overflow of our hearts. So by thinking about your speech, you are reflecting on the state of your heart. By working to speak in a godly manner, you will be working on your heart.

Third, with your feet, walk away from the house of sin and toward the house of the Lord.

Let your eyes look directly forward, and your gaze be straight before you.²⁶ Ponder the path of your feet; then all your ways will be sure.²⁷ Do not swerve to the right or to the left; turn your foot away from evil. (4:25-27).

Think carefully about where you go—both with your thoughts and with your actions. Keep away from things that are bad for your heart. And keep yourself in places that are good for your heart.

Consider what bringing yourself to church does for your heart? The worship service is the place to retune the heart in reverence and love toward God.

At the core of a healthy heart is *reverence*: fear and awe and love for God ("the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge"). The world will teach you to disregard God, to laugh at the idea, even to mock. The liturgy and service are designed to bring you to your knees, and lift your hands, to God in reverence.

Reverence is situating yourself before the Fact of all Facts. The Alpha and Omega. Where you decrease as he increases. It is to grasp your metaphysical situation and live in it.

⁴ Paul J. Griffiths, *Religious Reading: The Place of Reading in the Practice of Religion* (New York: Oxford Press, 1999).

Reverence is the antidote to hubris—to our culture’s unbridled self-assertion. Reverence is the starting point for repentance. Reverence is the attitude of the heart that is able to offer true worship. Reverence is the heart doing what it was made to do—worship. Reverence is the mother of faith, hope and love.

Think about how our Anglican service begins:

Almighty God, unto whom all hearts be open, all desires known, and from whom no secretes are hid: cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of thy Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love thee, and worthily magnify thy holy name: through Christ our Lord. Amen.

With your feet, bring your heart into the house of God, among the people of God, where the Spirit of God can renew it in reverence and love of the Almighty.

Augustine was a man whose life became a journey to find healing for his heart—he wrote in *Confessions*:

I carried about me a cut and bleeding soul, that could not bear to be carried by me, and where I could put it, I could not discover. Not in pleasant groves, not in games and singing, nor in the fragrant corners of a garden. Not in the company of a dinner-table, not in the delights of the bed: not even in my books and poetry. It floundered in a void, and fell back upon me. I remained a haunted spot, which gave me no rest, from which I could escape. For where could my heart flee from my heart?”⁵

He would eventually come to find, and famously write in a prayer to his Lord, “my heart is restless, until it finds rest in you.”

“Keep your heart above all else, for it is the source of life” (Prov 4:23). Praise God that in Christ Jesus, the Lord Almighty is the keeper of our hearts. May we keep them in His divine care.

⁵ Augustine, *Confessions*, IV, vii, 12; Brown, 163.

Small Group Questions.

1. Our hearts are complicated and can be confusing. Take some time in your group to talk about how the Bible understands our hearts? How might this differ from how the world understands the heart?
2. Proverb 4:23 says we are to “guard our hearts *above all else*.” What do you spend most of your time guarding and keeping? Your kids? Your job? Your home? What might it look like to spend more time guarding your heart?
3. Proverbs 4:23 says that from our hearts “flow the springs of life.” What are some ways you see people’s hearts impacting the rest of their lives? Do you notice this in your life? How has your heart impacted the “springs of your life?”
4. The Gospel involves a heart transplant (Ezek. 36:26). Has your heart been impacted and changed by Jesus Christ? What has this experience been like? How might you describe it to a non-Christian or seeker?