

# Donald M Mackinnon - Proverbs 4:23

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Preacher: Guest Preacher

[ 0 : 00 ] We are going to turn now to the passage of scripture that we read together. The book of Proverbs 4 and we are going to read again at verse 23.

The book of Proverbs chapter 4 and at verse 23 we read these words, Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life.

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

A number of years ago I had set my radio alarm to go off at 6 o'clock on a Saturday morning because I wanted to be up early. And I had set it to come on to Radio Scotland so that I would be able to hear the news before I would get up.

But the one thing I didn't do was cancel it so that on a Sunday morning it went off at 6 o'clock. And I was just about to put my hand out and switch it off. And the announcer on the radio said that after the 6 o'clock news they were going to broadcast a programme that had been previously broadcast that was looking at the spiritual history of the island of Lewis.

[ 1 : 33 ] And as you can imagine I was deeply intrigued as to what this would or what slant or what angle that would take.

And it was a most fascinating programme. I've never heard it since and I would love to get a hold of it and listen to it again.

It focused on the Gospel coming to Lewis from the time of Alexander McLeod and Uwegg in the 1800s to how the Gospel so quickly flourished and prospered in Lewis.

And one of the things that left a mark on me was where they were talking in the programme about Lewis in these days. Lewis in common with many places throughout Scotland and throughout the UK knew little of prosperity and were no stranger to poverty.

And that influenced every home in Lewis where the Gospel was having an effect because it restricted the books they were able to have in their homes simply because they couldn't afford a library as perhaps they would have wanted.

[ 2 : 49 ] And what intrigued me was this. The person presenting the programme said that there were three books that were common to be found in homes in Lewis at that time.

The Bible, as you would expect. The Westminster Confession of Faith and Pilgrim's Progress.

And these three books were what made up the spiritual library of many, many, many of the homes in this island in the early part of the Gospel coming to an island and flourishing.

In the days and weeks that followed the programme I thought about that programme often. And I asked myself the question if I was going to add to the library of three books what book would I add? What one book would I add? And quite quickly I came to the answer. The book that I would add is a book called Keeping the Heart by the Puritan John Flavill.

[ 4 : 05 ] Keeping the Heart is an extract of the works of John Flavill. The works of John Flavill run to some seven volumes. But quite early on after his works were produced publishers began to take an extract of the works.

And one of the parts of Flavill's work was where he had focused very, very much on this verse that we're looking at today and saw the tremendous fundamental importance this verse has for everybody who is a Christian.

And so the book was produced and as came no surprise to anybody was produced with the title Keeping the Heart. It is still widely available and when I say widely it's more widely available now than it's ever been.

You can get it online, you can read it, you can get it on your Kindle, you can have it on your phone. If you haven't read it I commend that book to you to read.

And I'm going to be making some references to it today as we go through this verse because Flavill lays a tremendous, tremendous importance for us all on understanding what this verse here is talking about.

[ 5 : 26 ] It's a verse perhaps that's tucked away and it's perhaps a verse that we're not familiar with. If we're not familiar with it then we should be because as I say it's a verse that's absolutely fundamental to every one of us.

Solomon here sets this duty before us. Keep your heart with all vigilance for from it flow the springs of life. Why?

Why did Flavill place so much importance on his understanding of what this verse is talking about? Well in the very opening page of Keeping the Heart, in the very opening page he sets that out for us.

And Flavill says this, the heart is the worst part in us before regeneration. We all know that.

We look out over a world today that bears testimony to what the natural heart is. Scripture tells us that that heart is by nature at enmity with God.

[ 6 : 35 ] And that enmity is manifesting itself in all the trouble and sin and vileness and violence and wickedness and everything and evil all over this world today.

Lives are seriously impacted because of that. It is the worst part before regeneration but it is the best part after the work of regeneration. And we know that as well.

But Flavill goes on to say something profound. The greatest difficulty before regeneration is to win the heart to God and again each and every one of us know that profoundly.

It's a staggering thing when you pair everything back and just look at the truth of life.

That after death we go to one of two destinations and these things are so clearly set out for us in Scripture. And yet people with that truth set before them and understanding what that means will say, eternal life, I don't want that.

[ 7 : 50 ] The good things of this world for 40, 50, 60, 70, 80 years, I want that. And if hell is at the end of it, so be it. And that's the reality of it.

And into all of that goes the proclamation of the Gospel. And if you look at it logically you would think the Gospel would immediately have such a profound effect on everybody and yet we know how difficult it is to win the heart through regeneration.

But Flavill says and now we get into the root of the matter. The greatest difficulty before regeneration is to win the heart to God. The greatest difficulty after regeneration is to keep the heart with God.

And we need to remind ourselves of that. I don't think this is breaking news to anyone of us. Every one of you in here who is a Christian today knows exactly what I'm talking about.

The difficulty you have of keeping your heart with God, but the duty is set out before us there. In this verse we are to keep the heart with God.

[ 9 : 07 ] Scripture here of course is talking figuratively. It's making reference to the heart and that's using their figurative language. And when it's talking about the heart we need to understand before we come to look at this in depth what we're talking about when we say the heart.

What is Scripture talking about here when it says keep the heart? Well it's the seed within us of our understanding. It's where our understanding is, it's where our consciousness is, it's where our will is, it's where our affections are, it's where our memory is, it's where our desires are.

All these things are within us. Just as the heart physically is where life is dispersed out to the body from the heart, so figuratively spiritual vitality is spread out to the personality from the seed of where the understanding, the conscience, the will, the affections are.

John Calvin said that all the wisdom we need comes in two parts.

We need to know God, we need to have knowledge of God and we need to know ourselves.

[ 10 : 32 ] That's the two areas that Calvin said that all the wisdom that we need to know comes from. To know God and to know ourselves. To know God we need to be regenerated and when we are regenerated the knowledge of God indwells us and acts as a constraint and a restraint upon our lives.

When we are regenerated we are constrained to do things that we weren't doing before. That change takes place, the new birth, conversion, converted, being born again.

But along with that it is absolutely vital for us to know our own heart. And so as we look at the duty of keeping the heart we need to understand what it is that we're looking at and that is the heart as

being the seed of all these different elements that I've referred to.

Setting out the scale of the duty, Flaville compared it to a military camp. A military camp where vast hosts of experienced soldiers are.

They're all together in this camp. They're very, very experienced soldiers, they know what they're doing. And yet, in amongst them, there are traitors.

[12:09] There is an enemy outside the camp trying to attack the camp all the time. And they are a real, real, real threat to the safety of the camp.

The camp is under constant attack from the enemy. But Flaville says, worse than what's outside is what's inside. There are traitors inside this camp.

And these things are a terrifying prospect as we take that and then we take that. And apply it to ourselves because we also know what it is to have enemies outside attacking us.

But we must also realise that dwelling in us, there are things in us that unless we keep them, unless we watch them, these things can have a catastrophic influence upon us.

And at this point, Flaville comes and he says, we need to realise at the very outset of this exercise that we're looking of keeping the heart, that it is a duty that we are called to perform.

[13:29] Scripturists say to every one of us here today, you need to keep your heart. But in and of yourself, you cannot do it. Now that might sound strange.

Why is the Bible telling you to do something that essentially you cannot do? For that, I think we have an illustration from another writer, A. W. Pink, who lived in Lewis until the end of his days. Another prolific writer and in a book he wrote called Practical Christianity. He takes this example. The duty that is set before us, but we cannot complete it in and of ourselves.

Pink says, just think of a farmer. Farmer knows that he can never ever make stuff in his field to grow. He may be a strong believer in the efficacy of prayer.

He may believe all that, but he has a duty to perform. He has a duty to go out there. He has a duty to care for the ground. He has a duty to clear the ground of everything that will obstruct the growth of whatever it is he's planting.

[14:48] He has a duty there to diligently plant that seed, sow that seed, do it diligently. And when he's done all that, he has to wait because he knows the increase for everything that he's done comes alone from God.

And so we need to realise that the duty is set before us to keep the heart, but in and of ourselves we cannot do it. It's what Christ said to the disciples on his last night on earth.

He simply said to them, without me he can do nothing. Not a thing, nothing. And as we set out at looking at the duty of keeping the heart, we need to understand that this duty is incumbent upon us and incumbent upon each and every one of us is the necessity for us to be in dependence constantly for God to prosper us in the work itself.

In coming then to start thinking about the exercise of keeping the heart, the first thing I want to say just for a moment is something about the word as it's brought before us here, keep your heart with all vigilance, keep your heart with all diligence as it is in the A.V.

And the word that's used there carries with it the idea that in keeping it, it's something that we're to keep on doing. It's not something that we do now and again, it's not something that we do once, it's not something that we can sort of give a half-hearted attitude to.

[16:51] We have to keep it and we have to keep on keeping it. It is something that is to be established in each and every one of us. We are to keep it, we are to keep on keeping it.

And the first exercise that we have to engage in and continue constantly to engage in is coming back to what John Calvin said.

John Calvin said that the two areas of wisdom that we need is coming to know God, we need to know ourselves. We need to know ourselves, we need to know our heart. If we need to know our heart, then the only way we're going to know our heart is to observe the heart.

And I can guarantee you now, for those of you who have been professing faith now for many, many years, you will look back over and you will see how at different times in your Christian history, your heart was in different states.

And the Bible talks about our hearts being in different states. Classic examples of that, the two on the road to Emmaus. What did Caes say to them about their heart?

[18:08] He told them they were slow of heart. And I think we can all sympathize with what it is to be aware of slowness of heart, slow to believe that sluggishness in the heart.

Elijah on Mount Carmel, a text that's sometimes preached incorrectly in that it's never ever set out in the original context because whilst it lends itself to an evangelistic use, we should always remind ourselves that it was first and foremost to the Lord's people that Elijah was talking and he said to them, how long will ye halt between two opinions?

That was a divided heart. And again, I think we can see times when our heart is divided.

There's that division in the heart and we need to observe the heart. We need to be looking at the heart. We need to be looking at every twist and turn of the heart.

Look at it all the time. You may say to yourself today, well, that sounds a bit heavy to me. I don't really think that it requires the emphasis that you're putting on it that every day, I've got to be looking at my heart.

[ 19 : 34 ] Do I really have to do that? I really have to be constantly examining myself in that way. It's not something introspective there that that's unhealthy.

Well, let me tell you something that is very, very solemn. You may not observe your heart this week, but I can guarantee you that your heart will be observed this week because we're not the only ones watching this heart.

Scripture tells us about another observing of our heart that's going on all the time. The heart of each and every one of us is being observed.

Scripture talks about that person as the roaring lion, the roaring lion. I'm sure you've all seen documentaries where you'll see a documentary perhaps focusing on a place like Africa, the wilds of Africa, and out there on the plains you'll see the documentary focusing perhaps on following a herd of wildebeests over the course of a year.

They take them through all the different stages, all the different things that a herd of wildebeests go through and the tremendous distances they can cover in a year as they move about from one part to the other.

[ 21 : 14 ] Quite often in documentaries like that you'll see how they'll focus on one particular animal that's been injured and the others how they'll close in and try and support that one and keep it going.

And there's always that deeply unpleasant scene in documentaries like that where you have a herd of wildebeests, one of them is injured and the others are there, but they're all there grazing completely unaware that just ten yards away in tall grass there's a lion and the lion will sit there and observe that flock of wildebeests intently, intently and will watch and see are there any young ones, are there any injured ones and when it spots the injured one and you've all I'm sure seen it all of a sudden that lion bursts out and before you know it the injured one is taken.

It's the cunning nature of the lion that it can see. It's being observing and our hearts are being observed in that exact same way and it's the solemnity of this duty that we are to keep the heart in that way. We are to observe it, we are to seek to gain every knowledge that we have.

We are to watch which way is my heart going, is my heart cooling towards the things of God, is my heart slow, is my heart divided. Is it the truth about me that I'm actually one thing on a Sabbath but something else in the other days of the week? It's the Sabbath I gave the day where I don't watch television, where I don't put on my computer, where I don't open a newspaper, where I spend a lot of time in the Word of God, where I read good books and then Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday.

These things are not there in the same way or they're not there at all or hardly at all. These things will leave you weak as a Christian and we need to observe the heart and see what is this heart of mine up to and be suspicious of it and have that and watch it all the time and strive and seek to maintain the heart close with God, close to God. It's easy for us to say, you know what, I've had a hard day today and actually I'm quite tired and the family have been very, very heavy and hard work today and work has been hard work today and life is hard and I'm not going to go to the prayer meeting tonight and I know I should and I know I could but actually I'm not going to and I just put in a note of personal experience here. Every time I have had that thought rising up within me, I have been astounded on a number of occasions when I have gone out and in the preaching of the Word, in the prayers of the Lord's people, everything that was weighing so heavy has been brought out either in prayer or in preaching and I realise then the voice that was saying to me, don't go, don't go, you've got every reason not to go, stay away, stay away.

[ 25 : 13 ] That is the observing of the heart and when that spirit rises up within you, strive to check it and it's easy to say, well, I can stay away and I've done it before and nothing's happened and I

accept that we worship a gracious God and where we do allow the heart to cool and we know that the heart is beginning to cool at first, what will you notice? Perhaps not a lot but the effect of not keeping the heart as we ought to is something that will only begin to decline and increase and become more and more and more of an issue and the terrifying thing about it is that it can gain serious ground within us and for us to be largely unconcerned about it. Where we're not exercised in the Word, the way we ought to be, where we become negligent in reading the Word, where we become negligent in prayer, where we become negligent in the means of grace, let us not be so foolish as to think that these things are not going to have a profound or even a catastrophic effect in our lives and

I'm going to give you an example of that from scripture because scripture is where we are to go and see evidence of exactly what we're talking about. Two men household names to every Christian, Joseph and David, both with exactly the same temptation but let's just observe the hearts for a moment and start with Joseph. Joseph in the house of Potiphar and day after day after day after day after day Genesis tells us Potiphar's wife pleaded with Joseph come and lie with me.

What a powerful, powerful, powerful temptation that is. Sexual temptation is brutally powerful, terrifyingly powerful and braves the man who would dare stand up and say I can stand in the face of that. No you can't, you need the grace of God to restrain you. If you are exposed to that temptation you need to be strong and when that lie on roar you need to be strong and you better be strong and day after day after day as the temptation increased to the point where Potiphar's wife grabbed him and grabbed his clothing and the only way he could get out of it was to wriggle out of his jacket and leave it in her hand and go but before he went he gave testimony to the state of his heart. How? Because he turned to her and he said how then can I do this great wickedness and sin against you? That's not what he said. How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against Potiphar who has been so good to me since I was bought in the slave market and brought here and who having sinned the evidence of God in my life has prospered me. How can I then do this great wickedness and sin against Potiphar? And you know that's not what he said. Because here is a heart kept and the kept heart spoke and said how then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?

And there in the brutal face of sexual temptation is the kept heart keeping Joseph.

[ 29 : 44 ] Now contrast that with David. Second Samuel chapter 11 opens with an account of the ongoing war that David was engaging in. Resuming after a brief interlude because of winter where all hostilities ceased and now without having resumed everybody went back to the war.

Everybody went back to resume the battle except one man. David stayed at home. It seems such an innocent thing when you read it. He were coming to the Bible till the first time.

If you had no experience of the Bible if you came to 2 Samuel chapter 11 verse 1 you would say well I don't see anything dangerous about that. The warfare was there that he excused himself. And from there you know what happened. Was his temptation that he was exposed to day after day after day after day like Joseph first sight of Bathsheba. Getting up off his bed in the afternoon had the heart become so slow that he was in bed till the afternoon scripture seems to suggest that it had. Getting up off his bed in the afternoon he saw a woman bathing and simply asked the question who's that. Somebody told him he sent one of the servants get her. Often reflect on the gossip that must have raged in the household amongst the servants of David when they would be talking to each other about. You know I was called in by the king today and he asked me something and it's I don't really want to tell you this but this is what happened. The point I want to dwell on is this. There you are observing the heart that has been neglected and you and I need to realize the importance for us of observing the heart and what you can say the difference between Joseph and David is this and it's the words that we're going to sing in conclusion from Psalm 119 and from verse 11 where we have these words. Thy word I in my heart have hid. Now that's a good thing to do that I offend not thee and the kept heart is a heart that is indwelt by the word and of that verse verse each person said this. Thy word the best thing in my heart the best place I have heard that I offend not thee the best purpose the best thing the best place the best purpose. When we keep the heart it is the word of God that is going to keep our heart and we need to watch the heart we need to watch the heart for it calling we need to watch the heart for slowness of heart we need to watch sin creeping into our lives and sin will creep into the life but we have to check it the minute it comes in. In our walk across the field of life just like we were talking to the children and we're all walking on the narrow way.

[ 33 : 52 ] Sin in the life of the believer in your walk ought to be to you what a stone is in your shoe. You know that if you're out for a walk and you get a stone in your shoe you can't carry on walking for very long until you deal with that stone because it is going to become terribly terribly terribly uncomfortable to you and you get that stone out of there and when we see the heart and the heart is beginning to wander and drift towards sin and sinful ways and that we need to deal with it in that way and just on that the psalmist again talking about sin and the heart reminds us in Psalm 66 if in my heart I sin regard the Lord me will not hear in order for us to have an effective prayer life we need to keep the heart by keeping it pure and by pure don't think for one minute that the bible there is suggesting that we are ever going to attain to a level of purity where there is no sin but when the heart the scripture talks about the pure and heart it is talking about the heart that is exercised towards purity seriously exercised towards purity that is what we are to be exercised towards and again I cannot emphasize enough for each and every one of us the importance of the word of God we need to have this word dwelling in us it's what Paul said to the Colossian believers he said to them let the word of God dwell in you there the idea is of a domestic setting you all have come here today from houses that is your dwelling house you live there people may come into your house and visit you for an afternoon but they don't live there they don't dwell there people may come and stay with you for a fortnight a month three months but they don't dwell there but you do and that's the way the word of

God is it's to dwell it's to live in there all the time and for the duty of keeping the heart we keep the heart by being exercised in the word of God and along with that is the importance of prayer we cannot lay enough emphasis on the importance of prayer first of all we are to watch and having watched the heart we are to pray interestingly when you think about it it's exactly what Christ said to the disciples in Gethsemane you would almost think there that he would have said to them pray and watch but he didn't he said watch and pray it's interesting to think about it we are to watch but then we are to take in prayer what the watching reveals and we are to take all that in prayer the importance of prayer watch and pray one of the Puritans said prayer is the key to open the gate of heaven and let grace out it's a beautiful thought by prayer we open the gate of heaven and we let grace out but prayer is also the key to lock the gate of the heart and keep gracing it's a beautiful thought and when we keep the heart and when the heart is kept it is upon that solid foundation alone that we are able to build a Christian life that will be a powerful witness in and of itself we can get so discouraged when we think about trying to witness in the day and age in which we live because many of us live in communities where there are so many people who know the Bible they have all the knowledge necessary for salvation they know it and yet some who are other we are to try and witness to them but I tell you the greatest witness is the witness that is you walk with God where they see the outworking in your life of keeping the heart and it being very very evident in your life that you're a person who's reading the word who has a desire for the word a person in prayer whether they hear you on the fleeting times they come into church perhaps at a wake or a wedding and when they see your consistency of life in attending the means of grace and when they see the places that you go to and the places that you don't go to and the places the way you live your life that is a very very very powerful witness indeed but at the center of that is the word of God dwelling in us and speaking again to the Colossian believers and very much conveying the same message about keeping the heart Paul said to the Colossian church set note your affection on the things of the earth set your affection on the things that are above where Christ is and the heart that is set on the things that are above where Christ is is not a slow heart it's not a divided heart it's a single heart and it's a heart that Christ is at the very very center of this of course all comes back to the issue that today is so unpopular in so many walks of life

because when you mention this word people just don't like this word at all in the day that we're in the word discipline but if we are going to be effective Christians we will only ever be effective Christians by living disciplined lives and the discipline that we are to give the priority to is the keeping of the heart but it has to be disciplined and you know there are examples for us in the world of men and women who are accredited to discipline when you say in bolt broke the world record and became the fastest man in the world ever one of the commentators said it wasn't the performance that won the race it was the preparation it wasn't the performance that won the race wasn't two hours before that you say in bolt decided that he would have a go have finally become the fastest man in the world it was days and days and weeks and months and years and years of brutal discipline and when you read the biography of some of these athletes it's quite astonishing

just how much discipline they require in their lives I was reading about Jessica Innes Hill and she was she's only a young girl and she came from a very very very difficult upbringing in Sheffield but she spoke quite early on about the necessity for discipline she would go to big sponsored events by her sponsor Adidas and they would have all sorts of wonderful events there very often with food as much as you could take drink as much as you could have stay out a lot hours of night bands playing everything she couldn't have any of the food she couldn't have any of the drink she couldn't stay out because she knew I can't have that everybody else around me is having it but I can't have that because it's going to affect the way I run I can't drink that I can't eat that I can't even stay here I've got to get out of here because at four o'clock tomorrow morning I've got an appointment with my running shoes and these people have tremendous things to teach us about the discipline in the Christian life and it's the importance of that discipline that we need to take on board for ourselves in keeping the heart quickly and just in conclusion the kept heart as I've said before is the foundation on which we build an effective Christian life going all the way back to what I started with

I often think of the homes in Lewis that only had three books the bible the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Pilgrims Progress yet I believe in the use of their books these books these people learned the necessity of keeping the heart and upon it they built using that as their foundation lives that produced the great spiritual giants that were seen in this island number of years ago Charles Price the American preacher was speaking in the conference in Stornoway on a Sunday night and he told this story about one of the cities in America that had numerous skyscrapers and that an emergency meeting had been called because during the maintenance inspection it had been discovered that there were severe cracks in the building on the 37th floor and all the senior management were present along with the CEO discussing as to how this alarming issue was to be tackled and the CEO was listening to this officer and that officer will do this how about this how about that and somewhat exasperated he said look guys forget it none of that washes with me get back to basics one of you go and get a hold of the architect who built this place I want a word with him and so it was agreed and the architect was sent for and the CEO asked to be informed the day the architect would come and a couple of days later his desk phone rang the yearland reception said the architect is in the building he said that's fine and off he went down to this 37th floor and he waited and waited and after a couple of minutes he phoned down to reception he said I'm on the 37th floor where's the architect and she said I don't know well he said can you please find him I'm in it later the phone rang we found the architect he's in the sixth basement these skyscrapers have floors that go way way way way down the ground and so the CEO went down to the sixth basement and he said to the architect what are you doing down here we've got cracks in the 37th floor and the architect said the cracks might be on the 37th floor but the problem is down here in your foundation and I guarantee you when you observe the heart and when you observe your christian life and when your christian life does go wrong it will be wrong not on the outward 37th floor but it will be wrong in the sixth basement of your heart that's where we go wrong that's where we need and that's why we need to keep our heart with all diligence why because out of it are the issues of life and when the issues of life go wrong dear friends I plead with you engage with this exercise and may we each and every one of us and it's a solemn thing for me to speak about because I realized the responsibility that falls upon myself having spoken about it finally and briefly coming back again to the library of the early christians the pilgrims progress in the pilgrims progress an account is given to us of how the roaring lion attacked christian on his journey from the city of destruction bunion gives in the name apollyon and for half a day christian was subjected to a brutal brutal [ 47 : 49 ] brutal attack by the roaring lion by apollyon years later writing morning and evening charles spurgeon said this and if you use morning and evening you'll come across this I can't remember which day it is but he says this christians battle with apollyon lasted half a day but christians battle with himself lasted a lifetime and the work of keeping the heart with all diligence is a work that you and I need to engage in throughout our life because as long as the issues of life are there we need to be keeping the heart and may god grant that we will go out with renewed desire to keep the heart acknowledging before god our inability to do so but expressing to him the desire we have to ever be reforming our lives seeking to increase the work of sanctification in our heart and in our spirit and enabling us to attain to that effective witness that our kept heart will bestow upon each and every one of us and may the lord bless these thoughts upon his work will conclude