

First Presbyterian Church of Plymouth, Michigan

Sunday, July 25, 2021

The Book of Proverbs

“Guard Your Heart”

Rev. Mark Hovermale

Rev. Mark Hovermale – Welcome, Announcements, and Opening Prayer

Welcome to worship today on July 25th. Thank you so much for joining us online!

Thank you to Geff Phillips and to Darlene Maginley and to Rev. Ashley and to Susan Underhill for all their help in making this service come together.

A few quick announcements for you: There's a school backpack drive being held on Saturday, July 31st. If you are accessing the bulletin online, the details are on page 10. The drive is being held from 10:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m., and they need 150 backpacks this year. So please check out that drive and be involved in that if you feel called to do so.

The Earth Care Committee is collecting used batteries on Sunday, August 1st.

This is an important announcement: There is a congregational meeting that has been called for Sunday, August 8th at 10:15 in the morning in the parking lot. The meeting is being called to approve Elder and Deacon nominations.

We know there have been some address and contact information changes in the congregation. If you have changes in your contact information, please send them to the church office so we can get those changes made.

The mask-wearing policy has been updated. If you are in the building and if you are fully vaccinated, no mask is required. Still you can wear a mask if you're more comfortable in doing so.

Just a reminder, the church building is still closed through the end of August except for Sunday services.

At this time, let's have an opening prayer.

Lord, as we come before you, we thank you just for the opportunity to come and worship you through the technology of online worship services. We are all in different places, but we are worshipping the same God. We thank you so much for that and we pray today as we learn about how to guard our hearts that we would do so and apply your Word to our lives. This, we pray in your Son's name. Amen.

Geff Phillips plays and sings “Your Love, Oh Lord”

Darlene Maginley, Director of Children's Ministry — Children's Message

Good morning, kids! A few months ago I was online, and I found a little saying that I liked so much that I put it in this little journal that I keep and I decorated it. I want to share it with you today.

The first part of it says, "Watch your thoughts for they become words." What does that mean? Well, have you ever been playing with a friend or with your brother or sister and you got really mad at them? All of a sudden your brain started thinking, "They are so stupid!" I know that *you* know that you're never supposed to call anyone "stupid", but if you let that thought go around in your brain for long enough, all of a sudden you find it coming out of your mouth. You yell at your friend or your brother or your sister and you tell them something that is not nice.

If you let your thoughts become words, pretty soon those words can become actions.

That means that when you start to say mean things, then maybe you start to *do* mean things. What if your friend or your brother or your sister built a big tower out of bricks, and you got mad and you called them a not-nice word and then you went and kicked over their tower of bricks.

Then suddenly your actions become habits! Now "habit" is something that you do all the time. So that means that now every time you get mad, you kick over their blocks or you break a toy, and if you do that for long enough, people start to think, "They're not a very nice person. They always get mad, and they ruin our stuff!"

Pretty soon, if other people think that about you, do you find it's really hard to get past that, to show them that you're really not a mean person, that you don't intend not to be nice? All of a sudden you find out that maybe you don't have as many friends, because you did mean things and said mean things.

Well, the Bible tells us in a verse, today, 'to guard our hearts.' That sounds like we should build a big strong wall in front of our hearts, so they don't get hurt. But actually it means just the opposite. It means that we need to build that big strong wall *around* our hearts so that we don't hurt other people and that's exactly what my saying was today:

Watch your thoughts for they become words.
Watch your words for they become actions.
Watch your actions for they become habits.
Watch your habits for they become character.
Watch your character because it becomes your destiny.

And God doesn't want our destiny to be angry or unkind. God wants our destiny to be loving and caring and to show *that* to all of those around us!

Let's say a prayer together.

Dear God, we confess that all of us get angry and we say things and do things that we shouldn't, and we are very sorry about that. Please help us to guard our hearts so that our hearts don't feel mean and angry, so that our hearts only feel love and joy from knowing you and let that love and joy overflow to all of those around us. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Rev. Hovermale — Discussion of Theme from Book of Proverbs

We have been going through the book of Proverbs for the last month, or so. This is a great book of wisdom in the Bible. Today we're looking specifically at Proverbs, chapter 4, verse 23. We will talk about it in the sermon, but we're looking at this idea of guarding our hearts and why it is important.

What does “heart” really mean in this sense, and why is this so important? It is important, as you will find out, because everything we do in life flows from our heart. So as we engage in these passages of scripture and in the sermon today, we're going to find out what goes *in* is really “what comes out.”

Rev. Ashley S. Ashley — Scripture Reading

Our first scripture passage for today comes from Proverbs, chapter 4, verse 23.

²³ Above all else, guard your heart,
for everything you do flows from it.

Before I read our second scripture passage, I'm going to provide a little bit of background. If you were to read Matthew, chapter 12, you would have an opportunity to hear Jesus preach about the Kingdom of God and to really showcase that power that He has through the Holy Spirit, performing miracles, including even an exorcism. When you and I read these stories, of course, we can't help but proclaim, “Thanks be to God for the power and love that Jesus is clearly showing.”

The Pharisees, by contrast, have a very different reaction to the Word of Jesus. They instead speak out *against* Jesus. In fact, they go as far as to call Jesus the Prince of Demons! Upon hearing this, Jesus offers a warning. He warns the Pharisees, and those listening, about what happens when we speak blasphemies against the Holy Spirit. Jesus also reminds the Pharisees that a “bad tree produces bad fruit”. Finally, as we read today, Jesus questions how they, acting like a brood of vipers, in what way anything good can come from them. Right there is where we will pick up with our second scripture reading for today, coming from Matthew, chapter 12, verses 34 through 35.

³⁴ You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of. ³⁵ A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him.

Friends, this is the word of our Lord. Thanks be to God.

Rev. Hovermale — Sermon: “Guard Your Heart”

Our sermon, today, is going to be a little different. I'm going to tell a lot of stories and also will interject some of the scripture in there. I'm going to be challenging you with some questions near the end.

The first story is about a guy named Jack. He was a big man--one of those guys that always seemed to have a smile on their face all the time. In fact, his joy was so evident it just passed on to other people. They felt happier because he was so infectious with his attitude. It was amazing, but really people would ask why wouldn't you be happy if you were him? He had a great family, he had a lovely wife, two college-age daughters who were doing well in school. He had a large home in the country. He was active in his

church. He was the vice president of a large defense-oriented company that paid him a lot of money. He seemed to have it all.

Then one day, (you probably know where this is going), without warning, he was called into his boss's office, and it wasn't to award him 'executive of the year'. He was fired and he was devastated! He had invested his life in this company, and he had helped grow it. Now they were letting him go.

Financially, he was all set. He was lucky in that way, but he was devastated that his company would let him go in the prime of his life. His self-confidence was replaced with frustration. His friendly attitude that had been so infectious changed to bitterness. He was ruled by anger and emptiness. He even got to a point where he considered suicide.

After weeks of feeling helpless and not knowing what to do, Jack took a step back and took inventory of his life. His wife--who had been his high school sweetheart before he made all that money, still loved him. His children were in college and their grades were excellent. He was still a respected member of the community.

His only real problem was that he had allowed anger and bitterness and frustration to wage a war within his soul. Once he stopped dwelling on what was wrong in his life and started looking at what was right, once he understood that his only real problem centered on his perspective, the way he looked at himself and his situation, Jack was wise enough to realize that he was on his way to effective living. He learned and gained wisdom, and then he applied that wisdom to his life! That changed his perspective and he handled what was coming ahead in a positive way because he had learned wisdom and then applied it to his life.

I think Jack's story has an essential principle of effective living and it's one word -- wisdom. The story paints a beautiful panoramic view of wisdom and it being the secret of effective living. In the Bible, wisdom is depicted as one of the first things that God created. It is an essential element for every man and woman if they're going to live and experience the true joy of living.

I'm looking at my notes and this is the real trick, isn't it? By that I mean--to apply what we learn from God's Word to our lives every day! I mean the Bible is amazing. We have to admit that it's a great history book, with facts and findings. It has accounts of miracles and the battle between good and evil. It is as good as any book at Barnes and Noble! (Just so you know, I'm a Barnes and Noble member, and go there every Friday!)

The Bible is often quoted in many places, but here's the thing. Let's just be honest here. We listen to a lot of sermons; I give a lot of sermons. We read a little of the Bible, and we go, "What does it mean? How does this apply to my life right now?" Many times, if you're like me, it's a struggle and then there's the question, "Why is it even important to apply the Bible to our lives? I mean, why can't it be just a bunch of "good sayings"?"

As I wrote this down it made me think of this: it really depends on your view of the Bible. What I mean is, when it comes to the Bible, what is your viewpoint? Is it that the writings are godly? You know, godly words give good advice and wisdom to your life and good advice can guide you.

Or is it God's Word, which means it's absolutely authoritative in your life? It means no matter what culture says or anything else says, what the Bible says, that's what you live

by. My 7 year old daughter would put it this way, so poetically, “Dad, no buts or no coconuts.” I don't know what that means but she says it really authoritatively!

Are these godly words to you or is it God's Word? Now the Bible does say it's God's word. It says it's authoritative and final, but you have to decide that for yourself. Let me just give you a “spoiler”. Everything you've ever heard or ever will hear in church, any sermon I give or anyone else gives, any Bible study you are part of, depending on your *view* of it, either being godly words, or God's Word, will shape what you hear and how you will actually apply it to your life.

With that thought in mind I want to encourage you about this passage from Proverbs. It's the secret to effective living. I've heard that and I love that! I love this description from Proverbs, because this summer we've been looking at the book of Proverbs and, really, it is the secret to effective living. Today we're looking at Proverbs 4:23. It says, “Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.”

Back in high school I was dating someone that my youth leaders said I shouldn't be. They were right! When we broke up, I was shattered as any 18-year-old, who has had their heart broken says. The one youth leader asked me, “Mark, how is your heart doing?” It was a great question!

I mean we all know that our heart is important. I even read my Bible notes that say if we store up good things in our hearts, our words and actions will be good. In fact, Matthew 12:34 says, “For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.” But what does “the heart” mean? The word “heart,” itself, is simply the organ that pumps blood. Of course, it's metaphorical. But what did it mean back in Bible times? I mean I read this excerpt from a theologian, and I just want to share his words with you. It may help us get an idea of what the word “heart” really means as used in the book of Proverbs.

He said, the Hebrew term for heart is often translated as the mind and it is easily misunderstood in our English translation. In both languages, the heart can simply be the organ in one's chest, but of greater interest biblically, this writer says, it is an expression of the acting self. In the ancient world, the word “heart” was used comprehensively, this writer says, to indicate the inner person, the *center* of a person. Will, thought, and feeling are all together in the word “heart.” Thus, all of a person's actions, and especially their speech, flow from the heart, expressing its content, whether good or bad. The heart is our whole inner person. It's a person's will, thought, and feeling all wound up into one.

I look at this differently. My mind and my heart *are different*. To give an example, my heart tells me that Michigan is going to beat Michigan State in football this year. That's what my heart tells me! My mind, however, tells me that's not going to happen! You see, they are two different things. However, this verse in Proverbs tells us to guard our heart because it's so important. Why? Because everything you do, everything you are, flows from it.

You know, in our lives we have unexpected events and tests. It's like a ketchup bottle, right? You don't know the quality until you squeeze it. When something presses against it then what is in there comes out. It's kind of a funny example of what happens in our lives. We get “pressed” or tested; what's inside comes out! That's why we have got to guard what goes in because what goes in, eventually, you guessed it, is what comes out!

One last story for you. I played basketball in high school. I wasn't the most coordinated, but I loved playing basketball. I wasn't really good at offense, but I was good at defense.

Defense requires a little bit of skill and a whole lot of effort. In fact, one time I had to guard a 7-foot guy. I'm 6 feet 1 inch and this guy was 7 feet 2 inches! It was hilarious because he weighed 250 pounds and I was 150 pounds. Anyway, it was funny!

One thing occurred playing basketball, which regrettably stuck for my whole life. It was an unfortunate nickname I was given, Mad Dog. It was not a positive name. I would get so into the game, I so wanted to defend someone, that, literally (this is gross), I would froth at the mouth! So one kid nicknamed me Mad Dog. It's one of those names, once it happens, you know this if you've had it happen to you, that one stuck. What it really came down to is I gave everything I had in the game, especially in guarding someone. It's a funny story but it really applies to this passage.

We have to guard our hearts with everything we have, because everything that comes out of us and how we live our life comes from the heart. That *sounds* good. How do you do it?

I came up with some questions that I want to ask you as we conclude our time. In order to guard your heart and to keep track of what is going in, so you *know* what comes out:

- ***What do you listen to?*** What are you listening to on the radio? Did the podcast go well? What are the things you're listening to that really go into your heart?
- ***Who do you listen to?*** I mean who do you really listen to in your life? Who is it that gets to pour into you, for whoever gets to pour into you is what you'll become in a lot of ways. So who gets that permission to pour into you?
- ***Who do you spend the most time with?*** Now, as parents, we talk to our teenagers all the time. Be careful who you spend your time with because we know that who you spend your time with is who you will become. As adults, we're not so good at this. It's like that's for the teenagers, that's for the children. Right? But think about it. If you work in business right now, if you spend your time with a bunch of people who are ethical, don't compromise when they could cheat, who are faithful to their spouses, are careful in how they react to people, in that way *you're* going to be like that. If you hang out with people at work who are willing to cross ethical lines to gain a buck, if they're willing to do things in the workplace they shouldn't be doing, and you're spending time with them, then you can guess what's going to happen. If you're hanging out with a bunch of people that are the most positive people around, then likely you will become positive. But if you're hanging around with a bunch of people who gossip and complain and that's where you spend your time, then what goes in your heart is going to come out and you are going to be like that. Who do you spend your time with?
- ***What do you read?*** What are you "pouring in"? Again, these are basic questions. What do you read that comes into your mind and into your heart, that will eventually come out?
- Here's a tough one: ***What do you watch?*** There are some movies I love, and I probably should not be watching. There are things that I watch, you watch, that we pour in and then it comes back out and wonder where it came from!
- The last question is a doozy: ***Who has influence in your life?*** Who are the few people, that when they say something that's what sticks and that is what you do?

Who are those few people that they pour into your heart, and you change where you're going? Think about them now. Do you want to become like that, because if you don't and they get the permission to pour into you, if you don't guard your heart, that is what's going to come out!

These questions aren't the “end all,” but they do help to paint a picture of everything that can affect your heart. If we are to guard our heart, which you know is important, because everything you do flows from your heart, and we know the heart is the entire inner person, we are called to be like Christ. As Christ followers, maybe some of the answers you've just given to these questions may be pumped up a little bit. Maybe you can do more of this or that, spend more time with that person, or reading. Maybe there are some things you've answered in those questions, in order to guard your heart and to live an effective life for Christ, that you need to bring down a little bit. Finally, there are probably some answers to those questions you need to eliminate completely.

Why is this important? I'm going to leave you with one main point: just one, and it's a negative main point. If we don't guard our hearts, we don't take this challenge seriously! If we don't guard our hearts, our actions and our words will not line up. *If we don't guard our hearts, our actions and our words will not line up!*

That's important, because if you ask people why they don't want to become Christ followers or Christians, their answers don't have a whole lot to do with Jesus. Most people love Jesus. However, they don't like Christians whose words and actions don't line up. When our words and actions don't line up, people reject what we believe.

Protect your heart for everything you do flows from it! Amen and thanks be to God.

Rev. Ashley — Prayers of the People and The Lord's Prayer

Friends, won't you please pray with me. Gracious and loving God, we thank you for giving us the good and wise words of scripture. We ask that you would bless our continued study in your book of Proverbs. May the lessons that you have for us take hold on our hearts. May we treasure the truth found in our bibles and may our greatest desire be to read scripture, to know the stories of your people and of our ancestors. The promises that you made to them—we ask that you uphold these promises for us and for the generations to come.

God, as we encounter your holy text each day, transform us by your Spirit who is active in each page of scripture. Turn us into a people who reflect your love and your power. Grant us hearts that beat and hands that work for our neighbors, for those who are broken, forgotten, exploited and abused, for those who are grieving, and for those who are homeless, penniless and stigmatized.

May we love all of your people as we would love those who are dearest to us. Gather us as your family, oh God. Join us together, despite our differences and disagreements, as your holy body. By praying the words, that your Son taught us, may we begin that unity:

Our Father who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.
Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,

as we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
and the power and the glory forever.
Amen.

Geff Phillips plays and sings *“Lord, I Need You”*

Rev. Hovermale — Benediction and Blessing

Let us guard our hearts because we know that everything we do in life flows from it.

May the blessing of God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit be on you and yours, today and forever more. Amen.