

Session 1

How to Guard Your Heart

Proverbs 4:1-27

Memory Verse

*Don't abandon wisdom, and she will watch over you;
love her, and she will guard you.*

– PROVERBS 4:6, CSB



HOW TO GUARD YOUR HEART

THEOLOGICAL THEME: We flourish spiritually when we carefully follow God’s commands and will for our lives.

CALL TO ACTION: Assess where you may be out of step with God’s will and take steps toward following Him more closely.

With an impressive 14 Olympic medals to her name, Katie Ledecky is the most decorated female U.S. Olympian of all time. Factor in the fact she holds 21 World Championship titles, and it’s clear that she’s one of the greatest swimmers of all time.¹ She is already one of the best, and her career is far from over!

So, how does one go about becoming such a renowned swimmer? While genes and passion certainly help, a key to success is, of course, really (really) hard work. After the Paris Olympics, Yahoo! Sports² reported that, to prep for that global stage, Katie had a strenuous training regimen, including:

- Swimming 10 times every week (racing against other swimmers for about two hours every training session)
- Hitting the gym 5 times every week (think: strength training, conditioning, weightlifting, and cardio workouts)
- Proper nutrition and good sleep

All in all, she was logging about 25-30 hours of training at the instruction of her coaches every week. The result? Her career is, clearly, flourishing. Katie knew she wanted to compete well at the highest level, and she directed her focus accordingly. She trained. She listened to her coaches. And it paid off.

This example has some parallels for the Christian life. Instead of “coaches” looking out for our wellbeing, we have a good and holy Father who, in His great love for us, has given us all the tools to live a righteous life. But, just like athletes are tempted to sneak in cheeseburgers and gym cheat days, we naturally drift in a direction that is bad for us, toward unrighteous living.

Today, we are kicking off a study in Proverbs about spiritual flourishing, which only happens when we keep our focus on the Lord.

? Have you had to implement a regimen to train for a goal? What did your training focus on?

? Why is it important we focus on the Lord in an intentional way?

Session Summary

Today's passage, written by King Solomon, dispenses advice for right living. In it, Solomon wrote of the preciousness of wisdom and understanding, gifts only God can give, which come by walking closely with the Lord. Walking closely with the Lord is the only way we can walk on the right paths He intends for us. The good blessings He has for us come when fully follow Him.

1. A Father's Example (Proverbs 4:1-9)

? What was Solomon's focus in these verses?

? What do you know about Solomon's father? What type of wisdom might he have passed on to his son?

The book of Proverbs opens by introducing the author as King Solomon (Proverbs 1:1), son of David, whose wisdom, an incredible gift from the Lord, was great:

God gave Solomon wisdom, very great insight, and understanding as vast as the sand on the seashore. Solomon's wisdom was greater than the wisdom of all the people of the East, greater than all the wisdom of Egypt. —1 Kings 4:29-30

It would be wise, indeed, for his sons to listen to the wisdom he had share. We are wise, too, when we listen to the godly counsel of faithful believers who are further along in their lives and faith walk than us.

Solomon referred to his own father, David, who was known for being a faithful man after God’s own heart (indeed, King David would go on to be the measuring stick against which future kings of Israel were judged by God; 1 Samuel 13:14; 1 Kings 15:3-5), and would have shared that faith with his children.

Notice the focus on wisdom. Scripture has much to say about wisdom and where to find it:

For the LORD gives wisdom;
from his mouth come knowledge and understanding. —Proverbs 2:6

“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom,
and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding. —Proverbs 9:10

Now if any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God—who gives to all
generously and ungrudgingly—and it will be given to him. —James 1:5-6



How would you describe wisdom? Since God is the source of all wisdom, what does this say about our need to stay close to Him?

The Lord gives wisdom. To have a healthy spiritual life, we need godly wisdom. We don’t flourish in life without wisdom, and we don’t get true wisdom apart from the Lord.

Solomon wrote of wisdom and understanding (not material things) as the most important things we can acquire in this life. The “garland” and “crown” in verse 9 symbolize favor from the Lord.³

2. Two Ways of Life (Proverbs 4:10-19)

? What themes stand out in these verses?

? What practical guidance did Solomon give for pursuing wisdom?

Solomon warned against wicked living by describing two paths: the path of the wicked, and the path of the righteous. The wicked Solomon described here seem addicted to evil deeds. Look at all the things he described them doing:

They can't sleep unless they do evil, unless they make another stumble (v.16). Wickedness is like food to them. Think about what it means that wickedness is their "bread," they need it and keep feeding it into their lives (v.17). Violence is like wine in their lives, a drink of choice (v.17).

Evil. Wickedness. Violence. This is an unrighteous life lived apart from the Lord. These descriptors bring to mind Paul's list of fleshly desires in Galatians:

Now the works of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, moral impurity, promiscuity, idolatry, sorcery, hatreds, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambitions, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and anything similar. I am warning you about these things—as I warned you before—that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. —Galatians 5:19-21

We walk "the path of the wicked" (v. 14) when we give into the desires of our flesh. When left to our own devices, this is where we drift, like a car out of alignment that moves toward the ditch on the highway. But Solomon warned against this type of living by avoiding this path. Don't travel on it at all; turn the other direction and pass it by. God desires a better life for us than this.

? What does it look like for us to avoid the path of the wicked in daily living?

Rather than follow the path of wickedness, Solomon advised following “the path of righteousness” (v. 18). Solomon sought to guide his audience “on straight paths” (v. 11). This calls to mind his father David’s words in Psalm 23:

He renews my life;
he leads me along the right paths
for his name’s sake. —Psalm 23:3

David spoke of the Lord as his Shepherd. Do you see the key to walking on this path—the right path? We only walk this path as we walk faithfully with the Lord. We follow His lead as a sheep follows a shepherd. This requires daily faithfulness. We don’t automatically hop to the path of righteousness and remain there when we are saved. Daily, we decide who we are going to follow, and only one choice leads us on the right paths. Only one choice leads us to spiritual flourishing. Are we going in that direction?

3. The Straight Path (Proverbs 4:20-27)



What further instruction did Solomon give in these verses?



What does it look like to “guard your heart” in daily life?

In the final section of Proverbs 4, Solomon focused on righteous living. He urged his readers to keep these teaching in their hearts (v. 21). He called these wise teachings “life to those who find them” and “health to one’s whole body” (v. 22).

Righteous living is good for us. Modern society often holds a view that God is a wet blanket, out to kill our otherwise fun and free lives. The Bible shows us something much different, though. The restrictive, damaging life is actually found on the other path. When we walk on the path of the wicked, we are slaves to our sin. In Christ, we have freedom. Only the path of righteousness is life giving.

In Solomon’s day, the heart was considered the location of knowledge and the source of all decisions.⁴ Your heart could guide you on the path of the wicked, or the path of

the righteous. We “guard” (v. 23) our hearts by keeping focused on the Lord, so we make righteous decisions.



What is the connection between righteous speech and wise living? How have you seen speech create obstacles to righteousness?

Note the warning against dishonest and devious speech (v. 24) which has the power to steer our hearts and our steps in a wicked direction.

Guarding our hearts and making sure we are staying firmly on the path of righteousness is less about what we are keeping out and more about what we are letting in.⁵ It means seeking the right path of the Good Shepherd and staying there. It requires us to keep our eyes fixed forward on the Lord. It requires us to carefully evaluate how we are living and making the next right choice. It requires us to keep on the path of righteousness and keep off the path of the wicked. It requires full focus on God and faithful obedience to what He is calling us to do. When we do this consistently, we flourish under God’s loving care.

Conclusion

In Proverbs 4, Solomon, son of David and the king most known for his wisdom, dispensed advice on how to live. He began by stressing the importance of wisdom and understanding, both of which come from the Lord. His memory of David telling him, “Keep my commands and live” (v.4b), advised him to walk closely with the Lord. This is the key to really living.

Solomon stressed that the wise path is the righteous one. He warned his readers to “keep off the path of the wicked” (v. 14). On this path is violence, wickedness, and evil, but, when left to our own devices, this is the way we drift, toward the selfish desires of the flesh. The path of righteousness is a choice, and to get there, we must submit our lives and actions to the Lord. This is the path of spiritual flourishing!


Staying on this path may be less about what we’re keeping out and more about what we’re letting in. We stay on the righteous path when we focus on God and making choices that honor Him and what He’s asked us to do.

There are several things we can take away from Solomon's teaching here. It's good to have a wise mentor you can turn to for advice—someone who walks closely with the Lord and has seen more of the Christian life than you. We need wisdom and understanding, and we receive these by focusing on the Lord. Solomon wrote to his sons, telling them to listen to his wise teaching, and we should also look to our Father in heaven and listen to His wise teaching (which is wiser than any human teaching).

The right path is a daily choice of faithfulness, and the key is following the Lord. Focusing on Him. Listening to His advice. Following what Scripture teaches us about how to live. Deferring to Him when His will for your life diverges from your own. This devout, faithful following of Christ is the key to spiritual flourishing.

 What does it look like to seek God's wisdom daily? Where are we tempted to seek wisdom apart from God?

 How do we encourage one another to seek God's wisdom and righteousness on an ongoing basis?

 How does righteous living give us opportunity to share the gospel with others?

Memorize

*Don't abandon wisdom, and she will watch over you;
love her, and she will guard you.*

- Proverbs 4:6, CSB

References

¹<https://www.olympics.com/en/athletes/katie-ledecky>

²<https://sports.yahoo.com/heres-exactly-katie-ledecky-training-154400317.html>

³David K. Stabnow, “Proverbs,” in CSB Study Bible: Notes, ed. Edwin A. Blum and Trevin Wax (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017).

⁴Ibid.

⁵Christopher A. Beetham and Nancy L. Erickson, eds., The NIV Application Commentary on the Bible, One-Volume Edition, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2024).