

A Spiritual Check-up for the New Year

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Proverbs 4:20-27

The astute care we take of things is called vigilance, whether it be with our yearly check-up with the dentist or some other physician who attends to a specialized need. “Vigilance is the state of being watchful and alert, especially to notice potential dangers or problems” [*Cambridge Dictionary*].

In 1790 John Philpot Curran (1750-1817) in a speech stated, “The condition upon which God hath given liberty to man is eternal vigilance; which condition if he break, servitude is at once the consequence of his crime, and the punishment of his guilt.”

Earthly vigilance is one thing but vigilance relative to eternal things is another. There is the greatest need to be spiritually vigilant. This is where Adam and Eve failed.

One such example of spiritual vigilance is when we are told to “Sanctify the Lord God in our hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh ... a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear” (1 Pet. 3:15). “Being ready always” is a way of saying always be vigilant.

On one occasion there was a ship in the north Atlantic on a stormy, boisterous night. A sailor described it, “The dark clouds hung over us, and the wind came with tenfold fury. The sea rolled in mountains, and the proud ship seemed but a toy amid those tremendous billows. Far up on the mast, on the look-out, the sailor was heard to cry, ‘An iceberg on the starboard bow! An iceberg on the port bow!’ The deck-officer called to the helmsman, ‘Port the helm steadily,’ and the sailors at the wheel heard and obeyed. The officers were roused, for there was danger on board to the three hundred precious souls. The captain spent a sleepless night. Pacing the deck or cabin. Gigantic icebergs were coming against the vessel, and eternal vigilance was the price of human life.” How grand is the one who keeps his heart? “Keep thy heart with diligence.”

Our text is a sort of spiritual medical inspection as the spiritual heart, mouth, eyes and feet are inspected for their state of readiness. So, perhaps we should contemplate this as a readiness exam for the New Year!

How many studies have been conducted on the healthiness that results from obedience to God’s Word? We have all kinds of ways outlined in Scripture to prosper our well-being even physically. One prime example is to honor your father and mother that your days may be long upon earth (Eph. 6:2-3; Ex. 20:12—the 5th Commandment).

Our text includes wise instructions to a son. In verses 20 to 27 the body is referred to some 11 times as the eyes, feet and heart are mentioned twice each and the ear, flesh, mouth, lips, hand and eyelids are mentioned once each. There is an introduction (vv. 20-22), and then one who is vigilant is commanded [1] to attend the heart (v. 23), [2] to attend the mouth (v. 24), [3] to attend the eyes (v. 25), [4] to attend the feet (vv. 26-27).

There is an introduction (vv. 20-22). In these verses the father (Solomon) commands the attention of his son to things of greatest import.

[1] *To hear is to obey*—“My son, attend to my words; incline thine ear unto my sayings” (v. 20). To “attend” is to listen or pay attention. The inclining of the ear is bowing over to listen closely, which is a sign of close attention being paid so obedience can be given. Just as Solomon requires his son’s attention to his words so our heavenly Father deserves our attention to His divine eternal Word. Charles Bridges noted, “A neglected Bible is the melancholy proof of an heart ‘alienated from God.’ For how can we have a

spark of love to Him, if that Book, which is the full manifestation of His Glory, be despised? And yet a superficial acquaintance with it is of no avail.” Will Solomon’s son listen? To truly listen is to obey.

[2] *To hear is to remember*—“Let them not depart from thine eyes” (v. 21a). The word “depart” means to turn aside from the straight and narrow way so we must not do such a thing. Oh, the Father’s Words should not depart from our eyes for they are life. God’s Word brings light for it is a lamp and light to walk by so we must keep our eyes alert (Ps. 119:105).

[3] *To hear is to revere*—“keep them in the midst of thine heart” (v. 21 b). The word “keep” has reference to keeping safe. Oh, how respectful we should be of the Word of God. Out of the heart are the issues of life. A home for the Word should be found in the middle of the heart, yea, consecrated in the sanctuary of the heart. Yes, the Word is to be safely kept in the citadel of the heart. To truly hear what God says is to reverence His Word.

[4] *To hear is to live*—“For they are life unto those that find them, and health to all their flesh” (v. 22). Oh, our Father’s Word is the living Word. Jesus said, “the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life” (John 6:63). The Word of God is for the whole person, soul and body. A true hearing of the Word brings life. This brings us to the primary aspects of this message: [1] We need to attend our hearts; [2] we need to attend our mouths; [3] we need our eyes, and [4] we need to attend our feet.

I. We need to attend our hearts—“Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life” (v. 23). Here we have a necessity and a reason for the necessity. The heart is fixed when trusting in the Lord—“His heart is fixed, trusting in the LORD. His heart is established, he shall not be afraid” (Ps. 112:7, 8).

There is a necessity of keeping the heart with diligence Solomon says. The Hebrew word for “keep” means to faithfully guard to ensure protection which is the way God keeps us from falling and presents us before His glorious presence without fault and with great joy (Jude 24). We need to remember that the “heart” is the stronghold of man, it is the armor protecting one’s personal treasure. If the heart is seized the whole man’s affections, desires, motives and pursuits which are vital are compromised. Therefore, it must be “kept” or “guarded” which shows the importance of a well garrisoned soul. Listen to these words, “Only take heed to thyself, and keep thy soul diligently, lest thou forget the things which thine eyes have seen, and lest they depart from thy heart all the days of thy life: but teach them thy sons, and thy sons’ sons” (Deut. 4:9). Guarding the heart is a preventive measure. A preventive measure was presented by the Psalmist “Thy word have I hid in mine heart,” and why is that, “that I might not sin against Thee” (119:11).

Are you personally capable of keeping your own heart? No, is the answer. We must have the enablement of the Holy Spirit. We can do all things through Christ who strengthens us (Phil. 4:13). Paul wrote the Philippian believers, “Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling” so how do you do that? “For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure” (Phil. 2:12-13). We are to bring to outward expression the salvation which God has worked in us. Since salvation is by grace it is by God’s workmanship that we are created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God has ordained that we should walk in them (Eph. 2:10). The gift of saving faith (Eph. 2:8-9) causes us to commit the keeping of our heart to our faithful God (1 Pet. 4:19). When one has a changed heart the struggle in this life is the keeping of the heart upon the Lord.

“A child of God ... cannot preserve himself, no not a moment: the greatest measure of grace attainable will not do it. If God should set up a believer with a stock of grace, and then leave him to trade for himself, how quickly would he prove bankrupt, and break and perish! By the same reason that a believer falls gradually when God withdraws Himself, by the same reason he would fall finally if God should leave him to himself” [Matthew Mead, *A Name in Heaven the Truest Ground of Joy*, 87 ff.].

No, the child of God must be “kept by the power of God” (1 Pet. 1:5). By faith we lay hold on the power of God, and we are kept by the power of God through faith. The spring of life that flows in the

believer flows to him for “All my springs are in thee (Jehovah)” (Ps. 87:7). By saving grace we are renewed, and by supporting grace we are kept, for the Lord “holds our souls in life, and suffers not our feet to be moved” (Ps. 66:9).

There are two reasons it is not possible for believers to preserve themselves. [1] *The power of indwelling sin and corruption.* The very continuing presence of sin in life before glorification and also the power of sin are a constant battle in this life. Grace cripples the power of sin but does not remove it in this life. Yes, the reign of the power of sin is destroyed, but there is still the remnant of sin. The regenerated Paul makes us aware of this, “I find then a law, that when I would do good, evil is present with me. I see another law in my members warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members” (Rom. 7:21, 23). [2] *The constant temptations in this life.* God’s marvelous and great grace in saving us will not make us immune to temptations. Our Lord and Saviour who was without sin was still assaulted by Satan with temptations. The devil’s design is the destruction of the child of grace, and the Lord must restrain him and keep us with His power. This thank God He does for we are kept by the power of God. When the devil comes to us he plays on our pride, our care for the world, our lust, our carnal desires, our weak faith, etc. The devil comes from without surprising us within. It is good that the Lord is our sure defense (Isa. 4:5).

How does the Lord keep and guide us? [1] *By the instructions of His Word.* His Word is a light. The Psalmist confessed, “So foolish was I, and ignorant, I was as a beast before thee. Nevertheless, I am continually with thee, thou hast holden me by my right hand. Thou shalt guide me by thy counsel, and afterward receive me to glory” (Ps. 73:22-24). God’s Word is the inspired counsellor. David said, “Thy testimonies are my delight and my counsellors” (Ps. 119:24). Yes, the word is a light to my feet, a lamp to my path (Ps. 119:105). Solomon reminds us, “When wisdom entereth into thine heart, and knowledge is pleasant unto thy soul, discretion shall preserve thee, understanding shall keep thee” (Prov. 2:10-11). [2] *God guides His people through the Holy Spirit’s guidance.* “When the Spirit of truth is come, He will guide you into all truth” (John 16:13). The Holy Spirit is called “the spirit of counsel” (Isa. 11:2). He who inspired the Word of God also illuminates that Word to us. We cannot be guided by the Word without the Spirit, and the Spirit will not guide us without the Word. “The Word without the Spirit cannot (guide), the Spirit without the Word will not guide us. The Word is a light without us, The Spirit is a light within us: the Word propounds the way to walk in, the Spirit enables the soul to walk in that way. Blessed are they whom God thus guides” [Mead, 96].

The reason it is necessary to keep the heart—“for out of it (the heart) are the issues of life.” Out of the heart are the goings forth of life. “(The heart) is the great vital spring of the soul—the fountain of actions—the centre and the seat of principle, both of sin and of holiness.... As is the fountain, so must be the streams. As is the heart, so must be *the mouth—the eyes—the feet.* Therefore, *above all keeping—keep thine heart.* Guard the fountain—as they keep the precious wells of the east—lest the waters be poisoned” [Charles Bridges]. The natural heart is a fountain of poison—“For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies: These are the things which defile a man” (Matt. 15:19-20). The purified heart is “a well of water springing up into everlasting life” (John 4:14). Oh, the condition of the natural heart: it is a double heart (Ps. 12:2), a hard heart (Prov. 28:14), a proud heart (Prov. 21:4), an unbelieving heart (Heb. 3:12), a cold heart (Matt. 24:12), and an unclean heart (Ps. 51:10). Consider the prayer, “Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (Ps. 139:23-24).

Spurgeon gave the following illustration: “You have seen the great reservoirs provided by our water companies, in which the water to supply hundreds of streets and thousands of houses is kept. Now, the heart is the reservoir of man, and our life is allowed to flow in its proper season. That life may flow through different pipes—the mouth, the hand, the eye; but still all the issues of hand, of eye, of lip, derive their source from *the great fountain and central reservoir,* the heart; and hence there is great necessity

for keeping this reservoir, the heart, in a proper state and condition, since otherwise that which flows through the pipes must be tainted and corrupt.”

The areas that are the outlets of sin must be guarded: *the mouth—the eyes—the feet*. Therefore, *above all keeping—keep thine heart*. “For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh” (Matt. 12:34).

II. We need to attend our mouths—“Put away from thee a froward mouth, and perverse lips put far from thee” (v. 24). There are things that must be “put away” or banished from us and two of them are a froward mouth and perverse lips, which is saying essentially the same thing. Thus, they are not to be entertained but “put away or turned aside.”

What is “a froward mouth?” The word “froward” is not often used today, but it means a twisted mouth because it is unwilling to yield to what is required. It has to do with a preverbal crookedness. Dr. John Gill described it this way, “A mouth (speaks) froward and perverse things; things contrary to right reason, to the law of God, and Gospel of Christ; blasphemies against God or men; everything that is untrue, unchaste, unjust, foolish, and filthy; all swearing, lying, and everything that is repugnant to truth and justice. Some understand it of men that are liars, blasphemers, and froward persons, who are to be shunned and avoided, and to be debarred the houses and society of good men.”

Thus, it is not a keeping of the heart, for froward speech betrays the kept heart. Paul put it this way, “Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers” (Eph. 4:29). Corrupt communication is destructive for it tears down, but holy communication builds up instead of tearing down.

What are “perverse lips?” “Perverse” has to do with that which is deviant and here it means deviant speech. Only a perfect person will not offend in word for we all offend; we use bits to control horses mouths so how can we put away twisted words but by bridling our mouths (James 3:2-3)?

“Our hearts being naturally corrupt, out of them a great deal of corrupt communication is apt to come, and therefore we must conceive a great dread and detestation of all manner of evil words, cursing, swearing, lying, slandering, brawling, filthiness, and foolish talking, all which come from a *froward mouth and perverse lips*, that will not be governed either by reason or religion, but contradict both, and which are as unsightly and ill-favoured before God as a crooked distorted mouth drawn awry is before men. All manner of tongue sins, we must, by constant watchfulness and stedfast resolution, *put from us*, put *far from us*, abstaining from all words that have an appearance of evil and fearing to learn any such words” [Matthew Henry].

III. We need to attend our eyes—“Let thine eyes look right on, and let thine eyelids look straight before thee” (v. 25). Are the eyes the windows to the soul? Our Lord said, “The light of the body is the eye: if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light. But if thine eye be evil, thy whole body shall be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness” (Matt. 6:22-23). So the eyes have to do with light or dark. Realizing this should cause us to pray with the Psalmist, “Turn away mine eyes from beholding vanity” (119:37).

The eyes should “look right on” or “look straight ahead.” The sight needs to be fixed in the right direction and on the right object as we press toward the mark of the high calling in Christ Jesus and then we will see to walk aright (Phil. 3:14 ff.). One has said, “Look determines outcome.” God’s friend Abraham walked by faith and it was described as he “looked for a city ... whose builder and maker is God” (Heb. 11:10). Lot looked for earthly aggrandizement or fleshly gain and was described as he “lifted up his eyes, and beheld ... Sodom and Gomorrah, even as the garden of the LORD” and thus he made his choice (Gen. 13:10). Imagine mistaking Sodom and Gomorrah for the garden in Eden.

“Let thine eyelids look straight before thee.” Eve failed here for when she “saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat. And the eyes of them

both were opened, and they knew that they were naked....” They hid from God or tried to do so but the Lord caught up with them and although they were now spiritually dead, their corpses were thrown out of the garden (Gen. 3:6 ff.). Remember Lot’s wife? If she had looked straight ahead instead of looking back, she would not have been turned to a pillar of salt (Gen. 19:17, 26). Remember David did not go to war but walked on the roof his house and “saw a woman washing herself; and the woman was very beautiful to look upon” and this led to adultery and murder (2 Sam. 11:2 ff.). Jeremiah talked about Israel seeking the Lord their God and that they “shall ask the way to Zion with their faces thitherward (or looking forward), saying, Come, and let us join ourselves to the LORD in a perpetual covenant that shall not be forgotten” (Jer. 50:4 ff.). How are we walking in the Lord? Are we “Forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before,” and “pressing toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:12-14)?

IV. We need to attend our feet—“Ponder the path of thy feet, and let all thy ways be established. Turn not to the right hand nor to the left: remove thy foot from evil” (vv. 26-27).

“*Ponder the path of thy feet....*” The hymn writer said, “Ponder anew what the Almighty will do.” And perhaps we should say, “Ponder anew what the Almighty would have us to do.” “Ponder” here means to weigh out and balance with the mind. Our walk for the Lord must be well ordered—“See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise” (Eph. 5:15). With all the pitfalls in life one must ponder and have his steps ordered of the Lord. When Joseph was tempted by Potiphar’s wife, he pondered the situation and refused her saying, “Behold, my master wotteth (knoweth) not what is with me in the house, and he hath committed all that he hath to my hand ... how then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God” (Gen. 39:8-9).

There is a proper path. Our Lord said through His prophet, “This is the way, walk ye in it, when ye turn to the right hand, and when ye turn to the left” (Isa. 30:21). The pleasures of sin are on the right hand or the left.

Remember in *Pilgrims Progress*: The lions were placed in a narrow path, so that there appeared but little way of escape for those that would pass by that way. Many apparent spiritual dangers seem formidable until they are more closely examined by the eye of faith and with confidence in God. Ignorance oftentimes exaggerates threatening danger, as it sees not and knows not the restraining power of Divine grace. MISTRUST and TIMOROUS could not tell whether the lions were ‘sleeping’ or ‘waking;’ the very sight of the lions in the distance alarmed them. CHRISTIAN’S ignorance, too, had well-nigh driven him back; for ‘the lions were chained, but he saw not the chains.’ It was the kind and timely voice of the porter, WATCHFUL, that dispelled his fears by dispelling his ignorance, informing him that these lions were for the probation of faith, and would be harmless if he would only walk in the middle of the path. How greatly do these messages of God’s ambassadors strengthen the pilgrims of Sion and embolden them in the midst of danger! Here were rampant, roaring lions; not asleep, but awake, in a narrow passage, and very near; but they were ‘chained.’ This announcement makes all the difference. MISTRUST and TIMOROUS might also have heard the good Porter’s news, only they came not near enough, but fled at first sight of the seeming danger. Suspicion is the child of little knowledge; therefore, let it know more, and see more thoroughly. Knowledge looks with open face, and therefore sees all things plainly.”

“*Let all thy ways be established.*” We must weigh our course of action and make our paths straight. Our course of travel must be down the middle of the road of righteousness for we should “turn not to the right hand nor to the left,” remembering the lions.

“Hence, virtue is often counterfeited, and religious truths have been disguised, or unfairly represented, in order to be suited to popular tastes. Then there is the danger of running to the extreme of anxiety about worldly interests on the one hand and of negligence on the other. We need also to be warned against the extreme of engaging in a course of life too busy and hurried, or of being devoted to one too retired and unemployed. We are formed for a mixture of action and retreat. Temper business with

serious meditation, and enliven retreat by returns of action and industry. Let us study to attain a regular, uniform, consistent character, where nothing that is excessive or disproportioned shall come forward to view. Turning neither to the right hand nor to the left, we shall, as far as our frailty permits, approach to the perfection of the human character" [*Hugh Blair*].

"Remove thy foot from evil." Press toward the mark for the high calling and not the low!

Oh, that we would walk in the way of the Lord in this New Year and follow where He leads us. "And, moreover, the Christian may await to-morrow with even more than simple hope and joy; he may look forward to it with *ecstasy* in some measure, for he does not know but that to-morrow his Lord may come. To-morrow Christ may be upon this earth, "for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of Man cometh." To-morrow, all the glories of millennial splendour may be revealed; to-morrow, the thrones of judgment may be set, and the King may summon the people to judgment. To-morrow, we may be in heaven; to-morrow, we may be on the breast of Christ; to-morrow, ay, before then, this head may wear a crown, this hand may wave the palm, this lip may sing the song, this foot may tread the streets of gold, this heart may be full of bliss, immortal, everlasting, eternal. Be of good cheer, oh, fellow-Christian; to-morrow can have nothing black in it to thee, for it must work for thy good, but it may have in it a precious, precious jewel. It is an earthen pitcher, and it may have in it some dark black waters, but their bitterness is taken away by the cross. But mayhap, also, it may have in it the precious jewel of eternity; for wrapt up within to-morrow may be all the glories of immortality. Anoint thine head with fresh oil of gladness at the prospect of each coming day. Boast not of to-morrow, but often comfort thyself with it. Thou hast a right to do so; it cannot be a bad tomorrow to thee; it may be the best day of thy life, for it may be thy last" [*Spurgeon*].