

“Guidance for Graduates”
Proverbs 4:20-27
May 24, 2009

INTRODUCTION:

As we continue looking at the *little* sins of Proverbs, we come today to the sin of deviousness. The verse in which that word appears is part of a father’s counsel to his son. **“Put away from you crooked speech, and put devious talk far from you”** (v. 24). The larger context is a father’s concern that his young son avoid the not uncommon problem of running his life into the ditch. Or to word it as he does, **“Do not swerve to the right or to the left; turn your foot away from evil”** (v. 27).

Anyone who has lived for any time knows young people who have run into trouble without realizing they were doing so. I have done quite a bit of premarital counseling, and I have never counseled a couple who had anything but high expectations for their marriage. But it has not always worked out that way, because some of those marriages have ended tragically in messy divorces. And how many of those voted “Most likely to succeed” in their high school classes have ended up as quite mediocre or even as failures? They seemed to have all the advantages of intellectual giftedness, good looks and a good personality, only to have life go tragically off course.

Since this is the season for graduations, including that of my own daughter, and since the author of Proverbs devotes himself in this chapter to giving instruction to his young son, I have called this sermon “Guidance for Graduates.” I don’t subtitle my sermons, but if I did I would give this one the subtitle “How to keep your life out of the ditch.”

Let’s notice something about the overall structure of this passage before we look at its details. The heart of this passage is the passage about the heart. **“Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life”** (v. 23). When the Bible uses the term “heart”, it means more than the emotions and more than the mind, though both the mind and the emotions are included in it. The best English word to get at its meaning is the word “motives.” You can see that meaning in our verse, where we are told that from the heart flow the springs of life. Just as a fountain is the source of water, the heart is the source of our words and our actions. This is a command against shallow living. If you have a problem with overeating, something is amiss with your heart. If you are lazy, the central problem lies deep within the motivational structure of your life. When someone’s life swerves into the ditch, it is because of a heart problem. So the immature son is instructed here to guard his heart. He is to devote the kind of attention to his heart that a young lady gives to her

appearance as she prepares for her first date with that young man she has liked for a long time.

So verse 23 is the central focus of the passage. It is supported by a listing of body parts both before and after this verse that describe the way we are to guard our hearts. The verses prior to verse 23 describe the receiving organs of the ears and the eyes. We guard our hearts by receiving the sayings of God's words with our ears and our eyes. And then the verses after verse 23 list the more active body parts: the mouth, the eyes as they are involved in laying our plans for life and the feet as they walk the paths of life. We guard our hearts not just by receiving God's word, but also by making good choices with our words and actions. Let me say it like this. We normally think of our words and actions as flowing out of the heart, and that is certainly the case. But it's not that simple. There is also a sense in which our words and actions help to determine our hearts. This is a two-way street, not a one-way street. Our words and actions flow out of the heart, but the heart is also influenced by our words and actions. So we are going to look at the words and actions spoken about in the three body parts he mentions: the mouth, the eyes and the feet.

I. The Crooked Mouth – v. 24

The first verb of this verse, **“put away,”** indicates that our problem with crooked speech and deviousness is not a small one. It doesn't say that we are to keep this away from us, but that we are to put it away from us. The implication is that it is already present in every one of us. Our problem with deviousness is congenital. This truth was demonstrated to us when our son Matthew was less than one-year old. He was able to crawl and stand up, but not yet able to talk. But that didn't stop his devious nature from being evident. We were holding a Bible study with a group of singles in our house, and Wendy had served a platter of cookies to those gathered, placed on the coffee table in our living room. Matthew had been given one cookie, but Wendy had told him “No” when he went for more cookies. There was a basket of coasters sitting next to the cookies, and he was allowed to play with the coasters. So while we were all watching, he dumped the coasters onto the table top and began playing with them. He picked one up and dropped it on a cookie, and then picked up both cookie and coaster in one motion, thus demonstrating himself capable of deviousness even before he could speak. We don't begin with a clean slate. Our bodies are designed to be temples where God's presence is seen. We don't begin the building of these temples on clear ground, but must first clear away the rubbish.

The main idea behind crooked and devious talk is the sin of dishonesty. Implied in the word *devious* is a deviation from something, and what we deviate from is the truth. The crooked also implies that there is something straight against which the crooked is exposed. So we are being commanded here to put

away all forms of dishonesty. The Bible doesn't accept our common distinction between white lies and more serious forms of dishonesty. For example, most of us would agree that perjury in court, what the Bible calls bearing false witness, is a serious form of dishonesty. But let me remind you of something Jesus said. **"I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King... Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'no'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one"** (Matt. 5:33-37). Jesus is not saying that we shouldn't swear an oath when we go into court, or get married, or on any number of other solemn occasions. Rather, he is raising all language to the level of swearing in court. He is specifically countering the idea that a person can lie promiscuously except when he steps into the courtroom and takes an oath. He is saying that everything we speak should be taken that seriously.

It is crooked and devious to exaggerate. Several years ago, when our daughter Meredith played basketball, her coach told me that the youth league was having real trouble getting the teams evenly divided as to skill level. The problem was that they relied on the parents to rate the abilities of their daughters. Even though this was a church league, the ratings were almost useless because the vast majority of parents rated their daughter as at least "above average."

It is crooked and devious to attempt to manipulate and control others by compromising on the truth. So if we let others draw wrong conclusions by withholding certain truths, we are being devious. Some people have learned that you have a better chance at succeeding in life if you compliment people frequently. Of course, affirmation and encouragement is in fact a good and godly thing to do. But it is not uncommon to take this fact and use it selfishly. So a devious person just compliments people even if it is not sincere, simply because it will help the one giving the compliment. The Bible calls that flattery, and it is an example of devious, crooked speech. **"A man who flatters his neighbor spreads a net for his feet"** (Prov. 29:5).

One of the chief ways we are to guard our hearts is to live in reality as it is, rather than reality as we want it to be. Deviousness occurs when we try to create our own reality rather than accepting reality as it is. So a person wants to think of himself or herself in a particular way, and they convince themselves, though it's not really true, that this is in fact the way they are. For example, I received in the mail this week an application for a Visa credit card called the "Black Card." Listen to the wording of the invitation. "It is my pleasure to invite you to apply for the exclusive Black Card. Limited to only 1% of U.S. residents, Black Card members are ensured the highest caliber of personal service. Cardmembers enjoy a 24-hour Concierge Assistant... Made with carbon, the Visa Black Card is guaranteed to get you noticed." My concern isn't whether or not you may have one of these cards, but the nature of this appeal. It is

characterized by lies. It begins with the lie that I am economically in the top 1% of U.S. residents, which I am not even close to, nor do I desire to be close to. But the big lie of this appeal is the lie they invite me to tell about myself. They want me to live in this false world of my own creation, where I am unique and get noticed because of my financial wealth. All I will need to do is to pay the \$495 annual fee and then whenever I whip out my Black Card, everyone is going to notice what a special person I really am.

According to the Bible, there is a single, great lie that energizes all the rest of lying. If this single, great lie can be dealt with, so can all other lies. The great lie is this: you cannot trust God to run your life, so you must take care of things yourself. It was the original lie that Satan told Eve in the Garden of Eden. "You will not die when you eat the forbidden fruit. God knows that when you eat it you will become godlike. You're going to have to do that yourself, because God is holding out on you." All lies stem from believing that the reality God has given us cannot be trusted. We need to seize control of our lives, and even if that requires a slight alteration of reality, we need to be in control. So, if we don't like the amount of income we have, we can lie on our tax forms and get more. If we don't like the thought that there is something wrong with us, we can simply alter our image and pretend to be something else.

II. The Wandering Eye – v. 25

If we are to guard our hearts, we must not only put away crooked and devious speech, but we must also keep our eyes focused on the path God has laid out for us. **"Let your eyes look directly forward, and your gaze be straight before you"** (v. 25). We have a saying in our culture that communicates well what is meant here. It's a sports metaphor that tells us, "Keep your eye on the ball." It means to remember your purpose and keep your focus there. Our purpose, according to the book of Proverbs, is to acquire wisdom. Such wisdom begins with the fear of the Lord. So the focus of our eyes is to be on knowing God and serving him.

There are two ways that we can lose focus. First, our eye can focus on distracting things that aren't necessarily sinful in themselves. Proverbs 17:24 says it like this. **"The discerning sets his face toward wisdom, but the eyes of a fool are on the ends of the earth."** Obviously, the internet did not exist when these words were written, but it is not hard to see how this applies to the distractions offered by the internet. It is possible to become so absorbed in all the information options available to us today over the internet and television that we take our eyes off of the path God has laid out for us. Remember Eve. She fell into Satan's trap only after she allowed her eyes to be diverted from God and his goodness by looking at the forbidden fruit. King David fell similarly. It was after he saw Bathsheba because his eyes had been diverted from God's call to him to serve as King of Israel that he fell into the sin of

adultery with her. As long as we keep our focus on knowing God and serving him, we will help guard our hearts.

III. The Swerving Foot – vv. 26-27

The son is given two commands regarding the path on which his feet walk. He is to ponder the path he will walk, and then to take care not to swerve from it. A path is something you follow, not something you make. In other words, we are not told here to lay out a path but to commit ourselves to a path that has already been laid out. There is a sense in which all the paths have been laid already, and the matter before us is to choose the right one. At the end of the day there are really only two paths—the path of living for God or the path of living for yourself. The path of living for yourself is what the author of Proverbs calls later the way that seems right, **“but its end is the way to death”** (14:12). We follow this path if our every decision is weighed by what is best for me. The other path is the one in which we weigh every decision by another factor—what would please God? Note the promise given to those who choose this path of living for God. **“Then all your ways will be sure.”** There is a freedom that comes when the only question we have to ask is “What pleases God?” He promises here to bring security to us, making all of our ways sure.

The second command regarding this path is not to swerve from it. Once we begin walking on the path of living for God, there are abundant opportunities to leave the path in order to follow something that looks more promising. But we are instructed here to persevere in that path, even when it seems that some alternative holds out more promise.

CONCLUSION:

Let's close with a request to God to make us men and women of truth, using our memory verse for the week. It's the very well-known Psalm 19:14 – **“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.”** Note that this verse is concerned both with our words and our heart. In this verse, we are making the very big request that our words and our thoughts be found acceptable in God's sight, the God who sees every last thing. And note that the word “meditation” is singular, indicating the central orientation of the heart. Our only hope for this request to be granted is that we have a rock and a redeemer in our Lord Jesus. Finally, note that personal pronoun “my”. If you are feeling distant from God, let me suggest that a likely reason is that you are bringing a false version of yourself to God. Bring your true self to the true God and receive the forgiveness and healing that comes from the true God.