



## How To Take Back Your Heart

Proverbs 10:11-12; 14:29-30; 15:15, 30; 16:32; 24:19-20; 25:28; 27:4; 29:22  
Grace Church | 7.25.21

This morning we continue our series in the book of Proverbs. Instead of walking verse by verse through a specific Book of Proverbs as we did with chapters 1 through 9 this morning we are going to examine quite a number of different Proverbs all speaking to a similar subject. The reason that this is applicable is because Proverbs is set up in this way most of the Proverbs themselves have no direct correlation to their immediate context in chapters and verses some of them are in groups of three or two and some of them stand alone. One of the most prevalent subjects in the Book of Proverbs has to do with the heart. By heart I mean the inner seat of the person, that inner disposition of the soul. In Proverbs, the “heart” is the place of the person where either wisdom or folly flows out of. Consider a few of these Proverbs, just from the first 9 chapters of Proverbs we have covered, which show the significance of “the heart” in this book.

Proverbs 2:2 - make your ear attentive to wisdom and incline your heart to understanding;  
Proverbs 2:10 - for wisdom will come into your heart, and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul;  
Proverbs 3:1 - My son, do not forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commandments,  
Proverbs 3:3 - Let not steadfast love and faithfulness forsake you; bind them around your neck;  
write them on the tablet of your heart.  
Proverbs 3:5 - Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding.  
Proverbs 4:4 - “Let your heart hold fast my words; keep my commandments, and live.  
Proverbs 4:21 - Let them not escape from your sight; keep them within your heart.  
Proverbs 6:21 - Bind them on your heart always; tie them around your neck.

Why is it so important to get wisdom into the heart? Because from the heart flows all things. It is the birthplace of emotions, feelings, and ultimately decisions. Jesus too had something to say about the heart which we need to get right first off this morning. In Matthew 15 the Pharisees approach him, as is normal for them, to try to trip him up. They wonder aloud: “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat.” Jesus, what aren’t your disciples following the Jewish 1st century COVID protocols?

What is Jesus’ answer? He rebukes the Pharisees for having outward faith by adhering to purity standards, but no inward faith. Then Jesus says this in 15:10-11, which is so important:

“Hear and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person.... But what comes out of the mouth proceeds



from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person.”

In other words, it's not what you eat or don't eat, who you associate with or don't associate with, that makes you unholy. Impurity doesn't come only from outside of yourself, as if you would be completely pure were you segregated from the rest of society. No, unholiness and impurity is not first about what you consume—impurity is already within you. You become impure and unholy when the sin that is deep inside comes out. And where does all this evil come from? It comes from the heart. One proverb I left out of the last mix concerning the heart is this from *Proverbs 4:23* - *Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life.* We can add, based on Jesus' teaching, that from the heart flows either life or death, either purity or impurity.

So this is the situation we find ourselves in today. All the Proverbs just read speak to us God's wisdom about how to control what comes out of our heart. They are, in a nutshell, about controlling our heart, about self-control and about checking our emotions. And truly, there could not be more important wisdom for us here, because we are a people who have lost control of our hearts. Therapy and trauma are at a historic high point — I am not saying therapy is bad, we all may need good counseling at times — I am pointing out the fact that we do not live in a culture which values emotional control. We do not live in a culture that celebrates restraint. We do not live in a culture that has learned how to guard our hearts.

So enough set-up, let me say this clearly. The Book of Proverbs teaches you today how to take back your heart. First, we will see the danger of losing yourself, of letting go of that emotional and inner seat that is your heart. Then, we will see how the giving over of ourselves to the wisdom of God in Christ is the way to take back our heart, which is the wellspring of our life.

## **The Danger of Losing Yourself**

It happens to everyone, it's that moment when you can no longer contain your emotions. And by emotions what I believe the text has in mind here is not primarily those emotions which come in a sudden wave from outside events—like the sudden sadness you feel when receiving terrible news—or even the ongoing emotions from a tragedy. I mean primarily those emotions which you know *shouldn't* be overwhelming you, but are. Like anger, rage, jealousy, hatred. We all know that moment, that feeling, when we lose the battle of our heart. Sometimes we call it “unhinged”. But is it so bad after all? Let's consider two dangers to losing yourself.

### **1. Unchecked emotion lets down your defenses and welcomes chaos in.**

First let's go to **25:28**.

A man without self-control is like a city broken into and left without walls.



In the ancient world, walls were everything. If you had no walls, you were completely helpless against the most basic attack. When we are unable to control our emotional response, when we cannot take back our heart, we open ourselves up to all sorts of attacks. You know this: when you are in that argument with your family member or your spouse, what happens? You cannot help but move from one anger to another.

I want you to see how difficult this is by looking at **16:32**.

Whoever is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city.

In other words, it's much easier to achieve a glorious military victory on the back of your own herism, to defeat a great enemy force who is holed up in a fortress, than it is to control your own anger. One is worth a bit of honor, the other is better.

Look at **Proverbs 10:11-12**.

The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life, but the mouth of the wicked conceals violence. Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all offenses.

If, as Jesus said in our example in Matthew, it's what comes out of the mouth that defiles, we see this confirmed here. The mouth of the righteous does not defile, but rather is a wellspring, a fountain, of life. In Scripture, water is synonymous with giving life to all things. The emotional outpouring of the righteous is life-giving. But the opposite of this is concealed violence, or hidden chaos. It may seem innocent, what comes out of the mouth of fools, but in reality it is hiding other consequences. What are those consequences? **Verse 12**, a stirring up or "awakening" of strife. Think about a still pool, full of peace. What do unchecked emotions do? They awaken strife where there is none, stirring up the waters. Strife here has to do with opinions or judgements. In contrast, love covers all offenses, the image is of a veil being drawn over, a head covering. Self-control and love cover over mistakes and offenses, but lack of self-control brings them up to the surface.

We see this again in **Proverbs 29:22**.

A man of wrath stirs up strife, and one given to anger causes much transgression.

A stirring up of *opinions*. What does anger do to us? It confuses us, it makes us think we have to have an opinion about everything. Instead of "stirring one another up towards love and good deeds" as Hebrews tells us, we are stirring one another up towards worthless opinions. This is the man of wrath, who cannot control his heart: he makes everything into a debate.



Because this is what anger really is: it's a desire to protect and control what you love. Tim Keller says that "Anger is love in motion."<sup>1</sup> So that means that there is righteous anger. Righteous anger is controlled anger, that is slow and patient. This is how God is described, is he not? Remember when Moses saw God's glory on the mountain pass before him? God says to Moses, here is the essence of my glory: "I am the LORD, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." Christians are not those who are never angry, they are those who are slow to anger. Anger is not the opposite of love, hatred is. And actually, apathy is the worst kind of hatred!

So what about the man who makes everything into a debate? His defenses have been laid low, he is acting with patient and slow anger, and what is revealed is that he is not angry about the right things. If anger is fighting for what you love, when we enter into a heated debate that causes us to become overcome with anger, we show what we love. And if what you love is your reputation and your opinions, then you will fight for them to the death.

Notice again the language of the Proverbs. It does not say "never get angry, for that leads to transgression". No, it says "do not be given over to anger." In other words, do not be consumed by your emotion. To do so is to show that you are valuing something higher than God. You have some idol that is being attacked, and your response is unchecked emotion.

In contrast, consider Jesus. When did he become angry? When his Father's house was defiled. Why? Because what he loved most was not his reputation but his Father. He is given over to and controlled by anger. He is angry to the proportion of his ordered love. To where does Jesus point his harshest action? Well, it is towards sin and satan. He goes with a sword to the cross, it is his reckoning for his enemies. It is there that God pours his righteous anger and wrath out on his son towards sin. Why? Because sin is the affront against his children whom he loves. God's love and anger is precise: it comes just at the right time of history in the right way on a Roman cross. He is not given over to anger or emotion. This is the doctrine called the Impassibility of God. That he is not full of passions. He is not cold and dry, he has feeling, but he is in control of his feeling, not the other way around.

So it is that God has controlled his wrath and anger. If he didn't have it, he could not be love. If he did not show anger for sin, That would be indifference and hatred, like a Father who has given up on a son because of his failure. But his anger does not control him—he places it right where he desires it should go: on his son. And so if you are in Christ, God is not angry with you. He is not ready to blow at your expense. He is gentle, lowly, loving, and kind. He hates your sin, but in Christ he loves you. He is not chaos: he is a wall, a protector for all those who rely on him. Amen.

## **2. Unchecked emotion defames the gospel of peace and will waste away at your body and soul.**

It's not just anger we have to deal with. Look at **27:4**

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<sup>1</sup> Tim Keller, "The Healing of Anger" from [gospelinlife.com](http://gospelinlife.com).



Wrath is cruel, anger is overwhelming, but who can stand before jealousy?

The word “overwhelming” here means “torrential”, like a rain that keeps coming and wind that keeps blowing. That is anger, but jealousy? Jealousy is worse, because jealousy is sneaky. Anger is a reaction when things are wrong, jealousy is a reaction to when things are right. As one commentator points out, Cain kills Abel not because he was angry, but because he was jealous.<sup>2</sup> Jealousy is what happens when our anger is left unchecked and begins to bubble up underneath the surface and makes what is good into what is evil. Jealousy, says **14:29-30**, is the opposite of tranquility. And what it does is it rots away at you, relentlessly turning your bones into dust.

Whoever is slow to anger has great understanding, but he who has a hasty temper exalts folly. A tranquil heart gives life to the flesh, but envy makes the bones rot.

Notice too that phrase there too. A hasty temper “exalts” folly. This word is translated from Hebrew as “lifting up”. Meaning, that when we cannot control our emotions, when we are given over to anger and jealousy and hatred, we preach an anti-gospel. We go around in the world lifting up foolishness for all to see. Remember last week in Proverbs 9, how when Lady Wisdom calls out she sends her messengers? In God’s kindness, we can be the messengers of his wisdom on earth. But we can also be the messenger of folly. And how do we do it? By being given over to our emotions. Angry Christians defame the gospel of peace. Why? Because Christ has made peace by the blood of his cross. There is no more need for selfish, jealous anger.

One last thing on this point. Some of you may be in a situation where anger is difficult to avoid, because you have been really really hurt. There is some evil person in your life or some evil act committed against you, and you did not ask for these emotions. You did not ask for the trauma and the anxiety and the anger. There is good news here in Proverbs for you too, in **24:19-20**.

Fret not yourself because of evildoers, and be not envious of the wicked, for the evil man has no future; the lamp of the wicked will be put out.

Sometimes we don’t ask for the negative emotion we feel. But this does not mean we have to be given over to it. No, God has satisfied his wrath on the cross for his people and also there he has sealed the fate of evil. There is no future for wickedness in this world. Instead, a new world is coming where you will have no need for anger. You can let go of the story of your life that is defined by anger and jealousy and hatred, and today, you can be defined by your future—God will be your avenger, make sure of it. To envy the wicked is human: after all, it’s easy. But to let go of envy and trust that God will make right the world: that is Christian. That is living in light of the gospel.

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<sup>2</sup> Ortland, *Proverbs*, 162.



## Letting God Take Control of Your Heart

So now we have seen the danger of losing control of your heart. And you would think that perhaps the solution is to get better. Do some self-control exercise, get spiritually toned. For all who struggle with self control, that always feels like the answer. Early in my Christian walk, I was told again and again the power of habit. Habit is the key to self-control, I was told, it is the key to emotional stability.

Grind, work, get up earlier, clench your fists in the name of holiness, and then one day you will find breakthrough. Your habits will change, and then you will achieve self-control. I was pointed to this passage in 1 Timothy 4 again and again as part of my education in Christian discipline.

Train yourself for godliness; for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance.

There it is, I was taught. Get into the gym and take care of your body, and then get into the spiritual gym of your prayer closet and take care of your soul. Godly discipline is the key to self-control. Take back your heart by new spiritual habits.

Friends, listen very closely. Spiritual habits and disciplines are very important for the Christian. To think that you will grow in Christlikeness passively is foolish. You must learn by God's grace to develop Godly disciplines. Discipleship is a training ground, it is a race, it does require spiritual fitness. But somewhere along the way in my early Christian walk I believed the lie that spiritual discipline is the end of the Christian life. I believed it was our goal. I believed that self-control was about what I could do. I began to love the idea of discipline more than I loved God. And when I struggled, I was angry. I was jealous, I was anxious, I was apathetic. And to this day, I often still am. But I forgot the context of that passage in 1 Timothy:

For to this end we toil and strive, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe.

Spiritual discipline is not the end of the Christian life. God is. Our hope is set on him, who lives. The most curious thing about true self-control is that it is not about self-mastery. It is about self-surrender. When we give ourselves over What is it, according to **Proverbs 15:15 and 30** that lifts us out of emotional bondage, that takes back our heart and leads us to feasting forever?

All the days of the afflicted are evil, but the cheerful of heart has a continual feast.  
The light of the eyes rejoices the heart, and good news refreshes the bones.

The light of the eyes, and good news. This is what leads the heart to a cheerful forever feast. It's as if Proverbs are showing us a face. Where are we drawn to, when we look at a person? Their eyes.



And what is the next thing that distinguishes them? Their voice, how they speak. So here we have a face with eyes of light, who speaks good news to us. Who is this face, who is it that we look to? It's the face of wisdom, it's the face of Jesus Christ. You want to know one of my favorite Scriptures? It's 2 Corinthians 4:6.

For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

How is it that we take back our heart? How is it that we move from rage and anger and jealousy and wrath to peace and feasting and joy? It's the face of Jesus Christ. It's his eyes, which are full of light and life. It's his news, which says that although we were sinners far from God, he has saved us and brought us to himself. Let me say this as clearly as I can: the only way to stop being controlled by your negative emotions is to be controlled by a more glorious emotion. It's what the old puritan Thomas Chalmers called "The Expulsive Power of a New Affection." How do you take back your heart, the wellspring of life? You rearrange your loves. You become more enamored with an affection for God in Christ that you do with yourself or any other idol. Let God and his glory, in the face of Jesus, by the Spirit, take control, and you will have self-control, because it is, after all, not the fruit of yourself. It's the fruit of the Spirit.

