

Keeping It Strong

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READ - *Proverbs 4:20-27* (wait until prompted in outline)

TEXT - *Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life. (Proverbs 4:23, KJV)*

THEME - The key to keeping your Christian walk strong is to concentrate on the state of your relationship to God, keep your speech pure, and maintain a constant focus on your destination.

Introduction

This lesson results from the recent survey, on which one question was "Please list 3 things that concern you," and which one person answered with "Continued faith - keeping it strong."

I find this to be an issue in my life for a couple of reasons.

1. The length of time I've been saved. Some of you may experience this, but most in this class probably have not been saved as long as me, and may not yet understand the problem.

ILLUS - My testimony - saved early, many experiences - ups and downs - wrestling with eternal security, etc. As I've grown older in my faith, I find that there are fewer mountainous highs and fewer cavernous lows, as things seem to have evened out. The Christian life has become like a decreasing sine curve, and one result of such an "evened out" Christian experience, is that it becomes harder to keep it strong. With ROUTINE comes lack of enthusiasm. How does one keep it strong?

2. The environment in which we live, where truth is no longer a constant to most people.

ILLUS - Have you noticed that when you get two people in a room with differing opinions, neither is usually interested in the truth, but both are interested primarily in their opinion. Most "debates" that occur today consist of one person shouting their position, and the other shouting back the charge "LIAR!" Then the roles are reversed. Facts don't matter, just who can most effectively accuse the other of lying. We see this on most TV debates, where it seems in vogue for all parties to just start shouting at each other at once with the loudest one supposedly winning. The entire world has turned into a Jerry Springer show.

I am reminded that *evil men and seducers will wax worse and worse (2 Timothy 3:13)*, and so these things should not come as a surprise. Nonetheless, it still makes it hard to keep your faith strong sometimes.

The result in my life is extreme discouragement. My soul, which is indwelt by the Holy Spirit of God, is grieved by this lack of interest in truth, and consequently, I find myself struggling to "keep it strong."

DISCUSSION - What about you? Do you find it hard to "keep it strong?" What are some reasons why you have such an experience in your Christian walk?

While in England, I visited the Cambridge University Bookstore, which is one of the oldest Bible printing sites in the world. When the Pilgrims came to America, they came with the Geneva Bible, which was printed at this site. It is still the source for some of the finest quality leather Bibles in the world. When I returned to the states, I awoke the next morning and opened up my new Bible. After lovingly breaking it in, I began to read in the book of Proverbs, and came across a passage which I believe the Lord gave me in answer to the question, "How do you keep it strong?" Notice *Proverbs 4:20-27*, please.

DISCUSSION - Does this passage give you insight into the issue? How does this passage say you can "keep it strong?"

Let me share 3 key issues that I believe are addressed here, and which we need to concentrate on.

The condition of your heart is central

The only thing that matters is your relationship to Jesus Christ. EVERYTHING ELSE IS SECONDARY TO THIS. One of the other English translations of the Bible renders this verse "*Above all else, guard your heart.*"

Too often we find ourselves thinking about outside influences, other people, circumstances and things that are beyond our control. Rather than think about external things, we need to concentrate on one internal thing, and only one - the condition of our relationship to Jesus Christ. I believe that is what is referred to here as "your heart."

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; (Deuteronomy 4:9, KJV)

And so, I ask you... how is your heart? What is the state of your personal relationship with Jesus Christ? If you are struggling to "keep it strong," for any of the reasons we've discussed, or for any other reason, the answer is to take a long hard look at your relationship to Christ, and CONCENTRATE ON THAT!

- If your struggle is because of the actions or behavior of other Christians, the answer is to concentrate on YOUR HEART.
- If your struggle is due to the ever-increasing hold of the world on those around you, the answer is to concentrate on YOUR HEART.
- Whatever the reason for your struggle to keep it strong, the answer is to GUARD YOUR HEART.

DISCUSSION - What are some daily, practical activities that you and I can implement to help us in guarding our heart?

ILLUS - We all tend to worry more about the spiritual condition of others than we do ourselves. It is human nature. The key to "keeping it strong," though is to fight that tendency and concentrate on our own personal relationship. An example of how we usually act is in *John 21:18-22*. Peter was told some hard things by the Lord, and his response was to turn and look at John and ask, "what about him?" Jesus reinforced our truth for today - "worry about yourself."

ILLUS - In the movie *Miracle*, which stars Kurt Russel playing the role of Herb Brooks, coach of the awesome 1980 USA Olympic hockey team, there is a scene in the locker room where the captain of the team complains briefly to Brooks about his treatment of a fellow player. Brooks barks back, "You worry about your own game, there's plenty there to keep you busy!" Good advice for all of us. Worry about your own game - concentrate on your own relationship to God - there's plenty there to keep you busy.

Some other verseS that teach this important truth:

Lay hands suddenly on no man, neither be partaker of other men's sins: keep thyself pure. (1 Timothy 5:22, KJV)

Keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life. (Jude 1:21, KJV)

Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them: for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee. (1 Timothy 4:16 KJV)

Concentrate on your speech

DISCUSSION - What do you think is meant by "froward mouth" and "perverse lips?"

DISCUSSION - What might be some examples of this type of speech today?

DISCUSSION - Why would control of our speech play a role in helping us to "keep it strong?"

What you say is a barometer of what you are.

Jesus illustrated this truth when He told the Pharisees in *Matthew 12:34*, *O generation of vipers, how can ye, being evil, speak good things? for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh.*

The Bible contains much teaching about what kind of things we SHOULD say, and what kind of things we should NOT say. May I suggest a Bible study on the subject as a homework assignment? Find a concordance and look up words like TONGUE, WORDS, SPEECH, SPEAK. You'll find an abundance of instruction. You'll learn that we are to have:

Pure speech

Kind speech

Rare speech (not much of it!)

Edifying speech (i.e. speech that HELPS not hurts.)

A key verse to help you with your speech, and one I suggest memorizing is:

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. (Ephesians 4:29, KJV)

And so, if we would "keep it strong," we need to guard our heart and control our tongue. There is one more vital truth, which the remainder of our text teaches.

Stay on target

DISCUSSION - Verses 25-27 teach us this truth in 3 different ways. Can you describe the 3 different ways that we are told to "stay on target?" in these verses?"

I notice three different approaches to the same truth:

1. Keep your eyes focused on the goal.

What you LOOK AT determines where you will go.

ILLUS - Byron Ferguson, great traditional archer, has written a book entitled "Become the Arrow." In that book he describes how he is able to shoot a traditional longbow with astonishing accuracy. Basically, he bores a hole in the exact center of the target with his eyes, and the arrow goes where he looks.

2. Consider where you are walking.

Another way of saying it, but gives a slightly different emphasis. It matters that we keep our eyes on the goal. Action is required, too, though as we concentrate on making each step we take a direct line toward that goal.

3. Consider NO detours.

Here is the same truth restated in a negative way to add emphasis. Keep walking straight, no matter what happens around you. Keep walking straight, no matter the detours that appear. Keep walking straight, and NEVER get off the path.

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In J.R.R. Tolkien's book, "The Hobbit," there is a good illustration of this. The travelers are sent on their way through a dangerous wood with the instructions to NEVER leave the path. However, circumstances arise, and the temptation is there to do just that. Once off the path, they cannot find their way back and all sorts of horrors befall them. Christian - stay on the path, and do not turn to either side.

In our introduction, we mentioned 2 Timothy 3:13, "*evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse...*". Turn to that passage now, in closing, and notice with me the solution to that problem from Paul's perspective. It is given in vs. 14, where Paul tells Timothy "*continue thou in the things thou hast learned.*" **STAY ON THE PATH, CHRISTIAN, NO MATTER WHAT.**

Conclusion

For a variety of reasons, it can be difficult to "keep it strong" as a Christian.

Although these seem like simplistic solutions, may I encourage you to prayerfully consider them, and work on implementing them in your life. Keep it strong by:

- Guarding your heart
- Controlling your speech
- Keeping your eyes and your feet FIXED on the goal.