

Welcome everyone. Go ahead and turn with me to **Proverbs 4**. My name is Emerson. **317 Series NEXT WEEK**. We have started off 2020 talking about what some of the things in life that we ought to be putting first. Dan talked about putting Christ first, last week Chad talked about putting the Kingdom first, and today, we get to talk about putting our *character first*.

But since we are 19 days into 2020, I have to ask: How many of you are 19-for-19 with your New Year's resolutions thus far? How many of you (maybe not 19-for-19, but are nailing your resolutions still? How many of you have given up? How many of you just experienced shame in church? Many people are foregoing any sort of resolution and are instead trying out having a "word of the year." I asked a couple friends of mine if they had any words for 2020. One buddy said his word was "Adventure." One gal said her word was "Health." Another friend of mine actually had two words – "Financial Promiscuity."

In all of the talk of resolutions or words of the year, most of the time we are striving to shape some aspect of our outer current reality. We want to shape our bodies, so we resolve to eat healthy and work out. We want to shape our checking accounts, so we resolve to budget and tighten the reins on our spending, sell more at work, and read books to grow in our leadership ability.

One thing that strikes me about those resolutions is that while they might serve to give us some "curb appeal," they do little to address our character. For instance, how often do we hear people say, "This is the year that I focus on curtailing my anger..." OR "Ya know, I'm honestly a pretty lustful person. I'd really like to rein in my licentious desires in 2020." Not often that happens. A majority of our resolutions do little to shape our interior world. They're all about what we *do*, but they don't *do much* for who we become as people.

I once heard someone break life up into **3 major buckets**: **(1) Who you are** – who you are on the inside, your character, your desires, your motivations, etc; **(2) Who you know** – this represents your relationships, who you know already, who you want to know; **(3) what you do** – this is what many of you have spent your whole life working towards, this is what you got your degree in, and for the parents and grandparents in the room, this is what you hope your kids will one day figure out!

You and I know that it's unwise to focus on **what you're going to do** before you focus on **who you're going to become**. But we live in a culture right now that tells us the opposite – that if you work really hard, make the right connections, THEN by the time you're 80, 90, etc. you'll have lived a *successful* life. We live in a culture that gets us to live our lives without ever intentionally deciding and pursuing who it is that we're going to become. And *we know* that when people do that, they run into all kinds of problems. Because we all know that while what you *do* can take you to all sorts of places, it's your character that will keep you there. And *we also know* that in relationships, one of the biggest determining factors in whether a relationship is healthy or not is *the character* of the people entering into that relationship. **Character matters.**

Now, we *also* know that **character matters** because we all realize that the thing that most leaves a mark on us when we interact with others is who they are/their character.

Think with me for a second about a person that you really, really admire – maybe it’s a best friend, maybe it’s your spouse, maybe it’s a mentor, whoever...what do you admire about them?

What comes to our minds are things like...“He is *always* there for me” OR “I can trust her” OR “He never lets me down” OR “She genuinely cares about people.” **Character matters.**

Ok, flip side of that...we know that character matters because we all have experienced the pain of interacting with someone whose character was...less than ideal. Maybe you grew up in a household with a physically or emotionally abusive parent. Maybe you’ve been in a dating relationship where the person was manipulative. Maybe you have experienced people who talk nice to your face, but gossip about you behind your back. Maybe your boss at work often treats people like a doormat as he pursues the bottom line. Whatever the situation or story is, the root of the issue is a character issue. **Character matters.**

This is why Solomon, the writer of Proverbs, says what he says in **Proverbs 4:23**. Solomon was the King of Israel and he was well-known by his own people and by the leaders of other countries for being one of the wisest men of his day. If we were to ask him “What *one piece of advice* ought we to follow?” I imagine he’d probably land on our verse today: **Proverbs 4:23** where he exhorts us to, “Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.”

The reason we are looking at that verse today is because it is making the case that **character matters**. It’s telling us that there is nothing more important than the core of who you are, your true self, the **you** that’s **you** when no one is looking at **you**. This is what Solomon is getting at when he mentions our “**heart.**”

When the biblical authors use the word “heart” in the Scriptures they are referring to a person’s interior world that serves to drive everything they do. The Hebrew word for “heart” is the word “**levav**” or “**lev.**” When we think of the heart, we often think of either the organ or, when referencing the heart, we think of just our emotions. But “heart” in the Bible meant all of that and more. In the Bible, the heart refers to the actual organ as in **1 Samuel 25:37 NIV**. But the Bible writers also thought of the heart as the place where all of human *intellectual activity* takes place since they didn’t have a word for the brain. For example, in the Bible you *think* with your heart (**Genesis 6:5 NIV**).

But it doesn’t end there. The heart *also* refers to one’s emotions as well. On one side of the emotional spectrum the heart is where one experiences emotions such as fear, anxiety, distress, and sadness. For instance, when one of the prophets was declaring to God’s people on God’s behalf of their coming redemption he addresses the people as “those with fearful hearts” (**Isaiah 35:4 NIV**). On the other side of the emotional spectrum, the heart is where one experiences joy such as in **Psalms 4:7 ESV**.

So the Bible describes the heart as the actual physical organ, as the seat of your intellectual life (where you think and plan or where you discern right from wrong), as the seat of your emotional life (where you experience sadness and joy, anxiety and bliss), and lastly the Bible describes the heart as the place where your affections, desires, and wants that lead to actions are located...such as when God talks about giving the one who delights in God “the desires of your heart” (**Psalms 37:4**).

So, to sum up...when the Bible talks about the heart, it is talking about the foundation of *all* the parts that make up our human existence. It determines what you think, what you feel, what you desire, what motivates you. Your heart determines who you are. **Your heart determines your character.**

That's why the last part of **Proverbs 4:23** is so important to heed. There's true wisdom to be found when Solomon tells us, "Above all else, guard your heart, ***for everything you do flows from it.***"

All you have to do to know that something can just *flow* out of somewhere inside of you is to just watch your reaction when your spouse doesn't load the dishwasher the right way **OR** just watch your reaction when someone cuts you off when you're driving **OR** just feel what's going on in your body when you schedule a meeting with someone and they show up 15 minutes late-anger, frustration, annoyance, cynicism, distrust, impatience, and pride...

This really gets on the ground for me because the older I get the more and more I am beginning to realize that *stuff* does, in fact, just *flow* out of me (good and bad). I'm beginning to realize that there is a lot of bad stuff that lurks around in my heart. Like, I'm not naturally a *great* person. Naturally, I think my M.O. would be selfishness, cynicism, arrogance, pride, and so on. And I know not everyone is *naturally* like that. Some people are naturally happy and nice and joyous. When I was growing up, my mom was/is one of those people. She'd wake up singing, "Rise and shine and give God the glory, glory!" And I'd wake up like...well, not *that*.

Case in point: I don't know if you're into personality tests or anything like that, but on the Myers-Briggs I am an INTJ – which is like the rarest personality of them all...BUT whenever you try to find out which fictional characters you relate to the most based on your Myers Briggs (like if you type in "INTJ Harry Potter" or "INTJ star wars"), you know who I end up with??? For Harry Potter, I get....HE-WHO-MUST-NOT-BE-NAMED ([pic](#))...and for Star Wars I get.....EMPEROR PALPATINE ([pic](#)). Not even Darth Vader who ultimately redeems himself in the end. I get Emperor Palpatine – the guy who is known for putting on a good face, but has been plotting his ascension to becoming ruler of the galaxy without any care for the MILLIONS of lives that get destroyed in the process! That's who I am *naturally*. But, that's not who I want to be.

NOW, with all this talk about the heart, about our character...we have to note that our hearts, without being transformed, are deceptive and sinful. We are working against the grain when we talk about putting our character first because of our sinful nature.

Jesus says, "For from ***within***, out of the ***heart of man***, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

Which is why the first words of Solomon's proverbs to us are vital. **Proverbs 4:23**, "Above all else, ***guard*** your heart, for everything you do flows from it."

Like a great defense does all it can to keep the opposing team from scoring, we need to do all **WE** can to ensure we're not allowing the lies of the enemy to get rooted in our hearts, making sure that what we watch is working for our spiritual health, making sure that the things we

pursue lead to godliness and our continued sanctification, making sure that the person we date is seeking Christ and Kingdom first, and so on and so on.

So...**HOW?**...*how* do we *actively* guard our hearts? How can we develop our character? If it's God's desire to see us seamlessly exemplify all the fruits of the Spirit, how do we do that?

(NOTE: None of this is to earn our salvation or act like a good Christian. This is not legalism. This is to help us grow into people of love!)

First off, you need to have a vision for which you're aiming. Without a vision to aim for, we end up just comparing ourselves to the people next to us and, in doing so, really end up with a recipe for moral mediocrity as a **GAP** begins to open up between our desired self and our actual self. I'd argue the best life ever lived comes from Jesus of Nazareth (his life having been vindicated by his resurrection). He is our north star that we point ourselves towards. It begins with putting Christ and his Kingdom *first*. Now...this isn't to say that only Christians can be good and moral. I'm just saying that without someone like Jesus as the chalk line from which you level yourself against, all you're left with is he-said/she-said moral relativism. Jesus is our acid test.

So, we aim for Jesus, but, in aiming, developing our character doesn't come from *trying harder*. It comes from training. Philosophers and psychologists agree with Paul and Jesus. They will tell you that character *can* grow. Virtues can be cultivated within us. But to do it we need to **train** to become people of profound character. John Ortberg in his book, *The Life You Always Wanted* provides a helpful illustration of this idea. He says imagine one day someone knocks on your door (I'm just gonna personalize it) and says,

G: "Hello! Are you Emerson Kennedy?"

E: "Um, yes, can I help you?"

G: "I'm from a new branch in the government and we've been watching and following you..."

E: "Surprise, surprise..." (*rolls eyes*)

G: "Um, anyways...I'm part of a new branch that scans people's DNA and can give a 95% accurate reading of what their body is best designed to do. Of all the people we scanned, you, Emerson, have the largest capability of being a world champion marathon runner!

E: *surprised face*, "REALLY....?" (*looks down at body*)

G: "Yes sir, according to our charts, scans, and predictive analysis, you are destined to be a runner. You can be a world champion runner."

So after trying to find out if this was a reality TV show or not, and after looking at all of this government worker's charts, I'm finally convinced: I AM A WORLD CHAMPION MARATHON RUNNER. So, I go out and buy a new Apple watch because I got to track my stuff. I go out and buy those too-short shorts that runners wear. I shave my legs for optimal aerodynamics, and I get a new treadmill. The next morning, I put on my shorts, and head to the treadmill, determined to get in 26 miles before I got to meet with Dan about an upcoming sermon series and to let him know that I can't probably preach the next couple of weekends like he's been begging me to. And it begins...and I start out GREAT. I've got the shorts, the shaved legs, I've got "Don't Stop Believing" in my headphones and I'm off – easy-peasy!....until I get to a quarter of a mile and I start sweating...until I get to half a mile and I'm wheezing pretty good (and maybe chaffing?)...and until I *barely* get to one whole mile and before calling it quits, convinced that the government just lied to me.

Funny illustration, but it illustrates the point that no matter our “destiny” ...it’s not achieved through *trying* or *willing yourself* to the finish line. It comes about through *training*. So, here are four things I’ve found that help me train my character to become like Jesus:

1. Spend time with Jesus.

One of the best/worst things to ever happen to our current iPhone generation is the Apple giving us a feature that allows us to see how much “screen time” we have. I say worst because now we can look at our screen time, see how much we use, and then continue using it except the same amount except only this time with shame heaped on.

This past week, my roommate checked his screen time and saw that it said...5+ HOURS. Crazy! Being the good roommate that I am, I quickly calculated how much time that amounts to in a year. Using your phone with an average of five hours a day, for 365 days, amounts to a total of 1,825 hours a year. I gently let him know that that means he spends 76 days out of a year on his phone! I have since neglected to check my own screen time. 😊

I say all this because, like an old Western where cowboys are always quick to draw their guns, many folks today do the same with their phones! Just always pulling it out when they get a free second to check the news, update social media, play games, or respond to a message.

Now, this may sound too idealistic, but imagine if instead of always quickdrawing our phones, we were always quick to bring God to our minds...When we first wake up in the morning, when we come to a stop at a red light, during commercial breaks in our favorite TV show, during awkward silences in conversation, and so on...what if we brought *God* to mind instead of the latest SportsCenter alert? If we want to become people of love, we’ve got to invest time with the God of love.

One, real, “on the ground” way I do this is by actually putting into my calendar little segments of time throughout my day where I have a “meeting” with Jesus. I have these scheduled at 9am, 12pm, 3:30pm, 5:30pm, and 9pm. During these times, I just quiet myself, and maybe ponder a psalm or another passage of Scripture from the gospels.

2. Go backwards in order to go forwards.

This point needs a ton more time, but suffice it to say that one thing I’ve realized that is vital to my training my character is my need to figure out what’s *underneath* the way I act, think, and feel. I can’t replace old character traits with new ones if I don’t know the underlying, subconscious reasons for the old ones. So I ask questions like:

- **“Why did I *automatically* respond that way when x, y, z happened?”**
- **“In what ways has my family of origin impacted how I act, react, think, and feel without me even realizing it?”**

- “How do my past relationships affect how I am able to relate to other people right now?”
- 3. Experiment with new habits.**

I ask those questions, reflect on my answers, and then assign myself practices to help myself develop new habits that will form me to become more like Jesus.

- If my natural response to something is impatience, I slow down by practicing silence and solitude (even if it’s just five minutes) or maybe I get creative and purposefully stand in longer lines at the grocery store.
- If my natural response is pride and arrogance, I practice confessing my sins to other people.
- If my natural response is giving into my lusts (sexual, material, etc.), maybe a practice I can pursue is generosity with my time or possessions, thus retraining my heart, mind, and body to *give* instead of training it to *take*.

The fun thing with this is, there are both tried and true habits that Christians have always pursued to help them shape their character to look more like Jesus (silence and solitude, fasting, prayer, and Scripture reading), but you can also have a little fun experimenting with new habits either by yourself, with your family, or with your life group and come up with your own!

4. Spend time with Jesus people.

Here at The Creek, not sure if you’ve heard of it, but we have a little ‘ole thing called Rooted. Rooted is a 10-week discipleship journey designed to launch you into a life group. You’ll join in conversations and interactive experiences with a group of 12-16 people that will help you connect to God, the church, and your purpose. If you want to grow your character, open yourself to people who are for you and who are for your spiritual growth. It’s the only way you’ll be able to identify your blind spots.

I’ll end with this: I have had the privilege of getting to help teach many of the older folks in our congregation. In fact, that is mainly what I spent my first three or so years here doing. Why a young, fresh-out-of-college fella like me ever fit in there, I’m not sure. It just *worked*. Maybe it was because we have so much in common like an affinity for **butterscotch candies**, jigsaw puzzles, rocking chairs, and padded toilet seats. Kidding!

But because of that, I’ve had the honor to officiate a lot of funerals of some really deeply formed followers of Jesus. And the thing that strikes me about all these funerals is when I hear grandsons and sons, daughters and granddaughters, friends, and acquaintances talk about whoever passed away...the thing I hear most is, “My grandma never knew a stranger” OR I hear things like “Jack would give you the shirt off his back...” OR “Mary had just this aura about her where she was never in a rush when she was with you. You could always count on Mary to be present with you.”

At the end of people's lives, the things they are remembered most for are NOT primarily the size of their bank accounts or the trim bodies that they managed to sustain over the years. What is remembered most about them is that they had worked to rid their hearts and their character of anger and lust, greed and impatience, cynicism and fear. You hear that they were loving, caring, kind, patient, trustworthy, honest, generous, joyful, hopeful, humble, tender-hearted, present, authentic, vulnerable, forbearing, loyal, warm, empathetic, compassionate, tender, meek, gentle, peaceful, unhurried, respectful, fair, and men and women of integrity.

As others have gone before me in the way of Jesus, putting off the old self, putting Christ and His Kingdom first, I want to follow in their footsteps. And I want THIS CHURCH to follow in their footsteps.

I want my heart and my character to be transformed to look and live like Jesus. And I want us, THIS CHURCH, to be transformed to look and live like Jesus.

At the end of my life, I want to be able to look back and say I focused on what truly matters – that I put Christ first, kingdom first...and character first. At the end of my life, I want to be able to look back and say THIS CHURCH focused on what truly matters – that we put Christ first, that we put kingdom first...and that we put character first.

Porch/ Offering / Communion

Porch: Open up the doors to the porch. If you want prayer over something that has been trying to work its way into your heart or maybe today you've been cut to the heart and you wanna talk with trusted people about following Jesus, you can do that there. Come at any point after/between services.

Offering/Buckets: We give because God gave.

Communion: We also come to this time of communion. And really, all I can say is that if you've got questions about the **heart of God** or if you're wondering about the **character of God**, just know that the heart of God was displayed on the cross of Christ. That God, in Jesus, was betrayed but wasn't bitter. That God, in Jesus, was humiliated, but wasn't unforgiving. That God, in Jesus, was crucified, but wasn't vengeful. No, on the cross, we see a God of hope. A God of redemption. A God of mercy. When we take this cup (represents his blood) and this bread (represents his body), that's what we taste and that's what we see – that at the heart of God...is love.