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Title: The Edge of Direction ("The Edge" Series)

Text: Proverbs 4:23-27

There are many principles to be learned from the Book of Proverbs. I believe the principles I have put into practice have guided me well. They have encouraged and instructed me in my marriage. They have helped keep friendships strong. They have provided financial direction. And they have helped keep my life on target. I suppose that's why I often go back to Proverbs. It's quick reading and you don't have to read much before finding a truth to put into practice.

We're in week two of a series called "The Edge" – about getting The Edge. Today I want to talk to you about the Edge of Direction. Perhaps there have been times in your life when it feels like you're not going anywhere. Have you ever had a vague idea of what you wanted to do or where you wanted to be, but you struggled to find the way? Have you experienced that feeling of floundering? It's frustrating, isn't it?

The text we'll look at today is especially helpful for those floundering in any area of life. This text shows us four things we need to focus on – four things we need to master – in order to make our lives what God intended them to be. Now, I could have called this sermon "How To Be Successful In Everything You Do", because the four steps we'll talk about today really are essential to achieving any goal that you set for yourself. I suppose I also could have called this sermon "Why Your Life Is Like It Is" – because your life will reflect what you do with the four elements of direction that we're talking about today. If you're IN BUSINESS, these four steps will help you be more effective in the work that you do. They will help you move in the direction of success. If you want to LOSE WEIGHT or if you want to BE HEALTHIER than you are, these four steps will help you reach your goals. If you want to STRENGTHEN YOUR MARRIAGE, if you want to get CLOSER TO GOD, if you want to BECOME A BETTER PERSON – these four steps will help you get there.

- 1. Guard Your Heart.** *"Guard your heart above all else, for it determines the course of your life"* (vs. 23). What does he mean when he says, *"Guard your heart"*? He's talking about that part of you that defines you more than anything else can define you – the deepest part of who you are. What drives you? What motivates you? That part that determines what you really want from life. What do you really expect of yourself? That's the part – Solomon calls it *"your heart"* – that he is telling us to guard. Have you heard anyone say that the heart wants what the heart wants? The quote goes back all the way to Emily Dickinson, and it has been repeated countless times since – USUALLY to justify the bad choices we make. It's the title to a pop song that came out a little over a year ago by Selena Gomez. I believe it was listened to by over 10 million the day it came out! It's about a young girl who is trapped in a miserable, dysfunctional relationship with an inconsiderate loser, and there is nothing she can do about it because she's so in love with him. She can't bring herself to do what's best for her. She says in the song, "I'm not alive until you call – and there's a million reasons why I should give you up, but the heart wants what it wants." Have you ever used that excuse? Many people do. "I can't help it. It's just how I feel. I can't change what I want. My heart wants why my heart wants." If you have ever gotten yourself in a situation where you want something you shouldn't want – something that isn't good for you – and you can't bring yourself to want what you really should want, then you know what a mess life can become when your heart goes unguarded. That's what Solomon says from the start: Guard your heart. Keep your heart with all diligence. We will inevitably move – even subconsciously – in the direction of that which we want the most. So you need to ask yourself: What do I really want to want more than anything else? The Psalmist says... *"Delight thyself also in the Lord and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart"* (Psalm 37:4). You can understand this promise to mean that not only will God give you the good things your heart desires, He will also give your heart the right kind of desire. When you delight yourself in the Lord, your heart desires the right things, not the wrong things. Here's what is being said. In order to establish direction in life, you need to get it straight at the top of the list: What do I want most in life? What do I want most in this situation? Or in this relationship? What do I really want my life to be about? In other words: What do I want to want more than anything else? For example: God, what I REALLY want to want is to love my wife as Christ loved the church. And what I REALLY want to want is to do my job with excellence in a way that brings You glory. And what I REALLY want to want is to manage my money well. And what I REALLY want to want is to be an attentive and loving father. I loved the scene in the movie "War Room" when after the jump rope competition, the little girl shouts, "That's my dad! That's my dad!" That not only happened because her dad stopped living with an unguarded heart and doing what he well pleased. But when he had a change of heart and guarded it, it made a difference not only for him,

but for the whole family. In order to give ourselves the edge of direction we need to decide once and for all what we WANT TO WANT more than anything else. And then we need to guard and protect and nurture that desire every step of the way – because the heart “*determines the course of your life*”.

2. **Watch Your Mouth.** “*Avoid all perverse talk. Stay away from corrupt speech*” (vs. 24). Now, he’s not just saying that we shouldn’t cuss and tell off-color jokes. Of course we shouldn’t, BUT he’s talking about more than that. He’s talking about refusing to say anything that diminishes the value of God’s work in your life. “This situation isn’t going to work out because nothing ever works out for me.” That’s perverse talk; that’s corrupt speech. “I guess I’ll have to work out this problem on my own, without any help from God or anyone else.” That’s perverse talk; that’s corrupt speech. When you ridicule and criticize and demean another person – that’s perverse talk; that’s corrupt speech. When you spread gossip – that’s perverse talk, that’s corrupt speech. When you talk on and on about your problems with no effort to explore solutions, when you fill your conversations with pessimism and self-pity – that’s perverse talk, that’s corrupt speech. You need to be aware of what comes out of your mouth, because: it affects YOU and it affects THOSE AROUND YOU ... and ultimately, it affects the OUTCOME of your situation. We need to watch what we say, because Jesus said, “*What you say flows from what is in your heart*” (Luke 6:45). If you find yourself being critical and callous and condescending to those around you, you need to realize that it’s not just a “words” problem, it’s a HEART PROBLEM. It’s my observation that the heart and the mouth tend to reflect one another. The words of our mouth reflect the state of our heart, and at the same time, the heart tends to move toward what comes from the mouth. That’s why you can’t talk DEFEAT all the time and expect to experience VICTORY. You can’t talk DOUBT and expect to be brimming with FAITH. You can’t talk PESSIMISM and expect to be filled with OPTIMISM. Your words need to reflect what you want your life to be. Now, the Book of Proverbs has more to say about our use of words than just about any other topic. The more time you spend in Proverbs, the more God will teach you about how to put your words to good use. Fools have always talked foolishness and wreaked havoc with their lives. The wise have spoken faith and wisdom and truth, and experienced God’s blessings. If you want to master the edge of direction, watch your mouth. And when all else fails, refer to Proverbs 10:19 – “*Too much talk leads to sin. Be sensible and keep your mouth shut.*”
3. **Fix Your Eyes.** That means keep your eyes focused where they should be focused. Solomon said, “*Look straight ahead, and fix your eyes on what lies before you*” (vs. 25). It’s tempting, when we’re floundering, to keep our eyes focused on the flounder – to waste our time looking at all that is wrong. For example, if your goal is to have a GOD-HONORING, SPIRIT-FILLED MARRIAGE – and you’re not there yet, it’s tempting to keep your eyes on everything that isn’t good about your relationship. If your goal is to GROW IN OBEDIENCE in your walk with Jesus Christ – and you still struggle with besetting sin, it’s tempting to keep your eyes fixed on your own wretchedness. If your goal is to develop FINANCIAL STABILITY and SECURITY for your family – and you’re scrambling to keep the lights on, it’s tempting to keep your eyes glued to the problem, and not God’s promise of victory. As long as your eyes are fixed on the problem, you’ll not be able to move in the direction of the solution. And so Solomon says, “*Look at where you’re going. Look at where you want to be, not where you are this moment. And certainly, don’t look back at where you used to be. Look straight ahead.*” In the Book of Philippians, after Paul said that he had not yet achieved the “perfection” he was after, he said, “*I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I press on to reach the end of the race...*” (3:13-14). Where you fix your eyes determines what your life becomes. If you’re always dwelling on the past, your life will be about nothing but the past. If your eyes are always turned toward the problems you’re facing today, then you will continue to spin your wheels – not getting anywhere. But if you turn your attention to what lies before you, if you fix your eyes on where God is leading you, then your life will become what He meant for it to be. In his book *Faith in the Game*, former Nebraska football coach Tom Osborne talks about the importance of focus in athletics, as well as in life. He says that just like the baseball player’s eyes must be locked on the rotation of the ball in order to hit it, and just like a receiver has to watch the football into his hands in order to catch it – we need to make sure our eyes are focused where they ought to be. That’s why the writer of Hebrews says – “*Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith...*” (12:1-2). You can look at your past and you can look at your problems, and you’ll continue to flounder your way through life. OR...you can look to Jesus, fix your eyes on Him, and He will keep you moving forward, until you cross the finish line. By fixing your eyes on Jesus, you’re fixing your eyes on what lies ahead, on where God wants you to go. In order to master the edge of direction, we need to be continually asking ourselves: Where am I focused today? Where have I fixed my eyes? On the past? On my problems? Or

on the presence of Jesus in my life? “Turn your eyes upon Jesus. Look full in His wonderful face. And the things of earth will grow strangely dim, in the light of His glory and grace.”

4. **Point Your Feet.** Solomon said, “*Mark out a straight path for your feet; stay on the safe path. Don’t get sidetracked; keep your feet from following evil*” (vs. 26-27). I love how the King James Version states it: “*Ponder the path of thy feet.*” In other words, think about where you’re going. Think about the steps you’re taking, and then map out a plan that will take you where you want to go. For example, if you want to be closer to God, then mark out a path and map out a plan to get you there. Begin each day with a moment of praise. Spend 15 or so minutes every morning in prayer and Bible study. Stop watching any media that is counterproductive to your spiritual growth. Listen to worship music. Read “The Battle Plan for Prayer” and pray. Consider fasting. That’s what Solomon is talking about here. He’s saying that you need to mark out a straight path for your feet. Wherever it is you want to go, create a plan to get there, and start walking in that direction. Here’s where we often drop the ball. You can know what you really, really want, and you can want it with all your heart, and you can talk about it with words of faith and hope and optimism, and you can lock your eyes on where God is directing you to go – but if you don’t mark out a path and map out a plan – and if you don’t start putting one foot in front of the other – you’ll never get there. You’ll stay right where you are for the rest of your life...floundering. Sometimes the steps we’re able to take seem so feeble, and we have so far to go, it feels like our puny efforts will never get us anywhere near the goal. We’re tempted to say, “What’s the use of trying?” Here’s the use of trying: I can promise you that when you mark out your path, and when you begin moving in the right direction, God will meet you along the way. When you draw near to Him, He draws near to you. When you resist the devil, he flees from you. That’s what James 4:7-8 says. And so I encourage you to mark out a path, and start moving in God’s direction. He’ll meet you along the way.
5. **Conclusion.** These four steps that Solomon outlines in Proverbs 4 really can help you get what you want in life. In fact, I would go so far as to say that you will never have that which matters most – I’m talking about fully realizing God’s plan for your life – until you’re willing to master each step. **A. Guard your heart.** Decide what you really want to want, and move your heart in that direction. **B. Watch your mouth.** Abandon all perverse and corrupt speech – including criticism, gossip, doubt, defeat, pessimism, and self-pity. Replace it with words of hope, comfort, encouragement, and faith. If it doesn’t reflect what God wants to do in your life – DON’T SAY IT! **C. Fix your eyes.** Turn your eyes away from the past and all your problems. Turn them, instead, toward Jesus. Fix your eyes on Him, and focus on where He wants you to go. **D. Point your feet.** Map out a plan, mark out a path, and start putting one foot in front of the other. In a way today’s message isn’t so much about getting what you want as much as it is about explaining what you get. That’s why it could have been called “Why Your Life Is Like It Is”. Because...where you direct your heart, where you invest your words, where you fix your eyes, and where you point your feet – these all determine what your life becomes. So DON’T do it in a haphazard and inconsistent way. Do it with CLARITY and FOCUS. I’m encouraging you today to focus on the direction your life is taking – your HEART, your MOUTH, your EYES, and your FEET. Master these four elements of direction, and your life will become all that God has promised it can be.