

ERIC C. SMITH

Wisdom for the Road
A Study in Proverbs 1-9

For Sharon Baptist Church graduates past, present, and future

My son, do not forget my teaching,
but let your heart keep my commandments,
For length of days and years of life
and peace they will add to you.
Let not steadfast love and faithfulness forsake you;
Bind them around your neck;
Write them on the tablet of your heart.
So you will find favor and good success
in the sight of God and man.

Trust in the Lord with all your heart,
And do not lean on your own understanding.
In all your ways acknowledge him,
And he will make straight your paths.
Be not wise in your own eyes;
Fear the Lord, and turn away from evil.
It will be healing to your flesh
And refreshment to your bones.

Proverbs 3:1-8

May 2025
Savannah, Tennessee

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INTRODUCTION

One spring break during my college years, I participated in a mission trip to Gulfport, Mississippi, to do some cleanup after Hurricane Katrina. I had been licensed to drive one of our university-owned vans during the week so I could transport about half of our group to the job site each day. A hill lay along our route, one substantial enough to warrant a “Bump” road sign, and a speed limit of 20 miles per hour. After a few days, my friend in the passenger seat turned to me and said, “I will give you ten dollars for every ten miles over the speed limit you hit that hill.”

Of course, it was an absurd suggestion. I also knew by my friend’s expression and the laughter from the backseat that all my peers knew I would never take him up on it. I was far too responsible and serious for anything so risky and adventurous. To this day, I don’t know what possessed me in that moment. But I determined to wipe that smirk from my friend’s face and take his money. I floored it.

I topped out at around 50 when we crested that hill, and our Dodge Caravan took flight. All my passengers shrieked, first with exhilaration, then in absolute terror. Finally, we landed with a bone-jarring crash, what seemed like forty yards from our launch point. I peeled my fingers from the steering wheel and turned to my friend. “That’ll be thirty dollars,” I said, feeling rather proud of myself. Then I pressed the accelerator, and nothing happened. We did not budge. The van was dead.

We learned later that day that the van was fine—the internal computer had registered a wreck, and so it automatically shut off the fuel. But in the meantime, I was absolutely sick with regret, embarrassment, worry about replacing a van, disappointing our leaders, and more.

How had I gotten into that situation? My problem was not that I did not love God; I was walking closer to the Lord than I ever had in my life. It was not that I did not know God's Word—I was tearing up my Bible as a ministry student, and preaching every chance I could get. I was not a mean guy with bad intentions, looking to endanger people and damage property. My problem, in this and countless other stories I could share, is simply that I was stupid. I lacked wisdom. I was a fool. In a real-life scenario, I failed to apply basic knowledge of God's Word and God's world (i.e., the laws of gravity), and then I had to deal with the consequences. Mercifully, God provided the book of Proverbs for dopes just like me.

We learn in this priceless portion of Scripture just how deeply God cares for us, even at our sorriest, silliest, and sinful-est. He does not *just* want to forgive your sins and take you to heaven when you die, while in-between you thrash around desperately in everyday life, making a total mess of it. God wants to help you and me in all of the ordinary, even mundane, details of our real lives: time-management, in-laws, communication, sexual desire, personal finances, anger, peer-pressure, and much more. In what area do you keep tripping up in life? That is just where God wants to make you *wise*.

Imagine that you are about to be dropped by helicopter into a deep, dark jungle wilderness, in a hostile foreign country. You are told that you must find your way back to civilization, with no promises that you will make it out alive—and you have never even been camping in your backyard. But as panic sets in, you are told that you also have the option to take along a world-class survival expert as your personal guide. He knows how to do all the things you that you don't, how to

avoid all the deadly threats you aren't even aware of, and he can get you back home. Obviously, you would attach yourself to that guide, not letting him out of your sight until you were safe in your own bed. Through Proverbs, you and I are offered a Guide like that before we parachute into the war-zone of this world. Except *this* Guide made the wilderness, and made you. He is Wisdom itself. Why *wouldn't* you glue yourself to him, all the way home to heaven?

A brief explanation of how Proverbs is structured might help us before we get started. God communicates his wisdom here mostly through the voice of a father, preparing his son for independence and adulthood (occasionally, as in chapter 31, a young man's mother does the talking). The first nine chapters, which this devotional book covers, are mostly fatherly "talks," about things this dad especially wants his son to understand before he leaves home. Proverbs chapters 10–31 are mostly collections of the zingy, one-line wisdom statements that we associate with the book. I think these are also best understood as a father preparing his son for adulthood, addressing a variety of themes as they come up in the course of daily life (a la Deuteronomy 6:4–9). Lord willing, I'd like to cover this latter section of Proverbs in a forthcoming book.

For several years now, I have enjoyed preaching from Proverbs on "Graduation Sunday" each May. Proverbs is invaluable for all of us, but no book of the Bible is better suited for a group of eighteen-year-olds. As I wrap up *Wisdom for the Road*, our church is now preparing to send out the largest crop of graduates I can remember. Some of them I have pastored for twelve years—I can remember meeting them when they were first-graders. Many of them I have baptized. I love all of them dearly, and have thought of them often in the writing of this book.

But working through Proverbs has also brought to mind faces of Graduation Sundays past, of young adults whose weddings I have now officiated and whose babies I have welcomed into the world. I am also mindful of the many children now growing up in our church (including my own three), who will one day need this wisdom for themselves.

For all of them, and for the rest of us out there on the road of life, I pray that we would know the abundant life that comes only from walking obediently with Jesus Christ, the Wisdom of God.

In Jesus' Love,

Pastor Eric

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1. THE AIM OF PROVERBS

What does the book of Proverbs offer? Today's reading tells us what we have to gain.

(1) *Wisdom.* Wisdom is not identical to “book-smarts,” or a high I.Q. Wisdom is a skill. Think of a good carpenter, who can build a strong and beautiful house, accounting for every tiny detail and answering every complication that arises. Or a caterer, who knows what it takes to feed a hot and delicious meal to hundreds of hungry people in a timely fashion. Wisdom is like that: it is the skill of *living*, the practical ability to navigate your environment with success. Proverbs 30:24–28 describes four creatures who are small, yet who thrive by *wisdom*. Ants store up food in summer; rock badgers learn how to burrow in cliffs; locusts function in swarms; lizards find their way to kings' palaces. They understand their environment and their place in it, and they adapt accordingly. With wisdom, you can flourish no matter your weaknesses. Without wisdom, you will flounder no matter your strengths. God wants to make *you* skillful at life.

(2) *Insight.* Life is tricky. Appearances are deceiving. The best path is rarely obvious. It can *seem* like a good idea to take that job. Or to flirt with that married person. Or to overspend to impress your neighbors. Or to go to that party. Or to not discipline that child. Until you wake up one day, and realize that you have made a horrible mistake. Like Solomon dealing with the two women (1 Kings 3:16–28), insight “*sees into*” the true nature of a deceptive situation, and saves us from getting scammed.

(3) Instruction. Also translated as “discipline,” instruction involves correction. The truth is, none of us is naturally wise: “Folly is bound up in the heart of a child (22:15).” The sin we are all born into does not just make us morally unclean, but practically unwise. It skews our view of everything. For instance, we tend to think that we are always right, that we deserve everything we want, and that we always have a good reason for the selfish things we do. Foolishness is our factory setting. The only way to undo this self-destructive stupidity is to receive corrective instruction. We must admit that, left to ourselves, we are wrong about just about everything. We need to submit to God’s training program. We must “receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls (Js 1:21).” So no more justifying yourself, or explaining why you did it your way. Just zip it, and let God’s word correct, rebuke, redirect you to true life. If that sounds painful, it is! The only thing more painful is ignoring God’s instruction.

(4) Character. Plenty of ungodly people are very good at getting what they want in life: thieves, liars, manipulators, seducers, schemers, and slanderers. This is the “craftiness” of the serpent in the garden (Gen 3:1–6). James calls it “demonic wisdom (Js 3:15),” a self-serving intelligence that comes straight from hell. Craftiness may win you temporary success in this life, no doubt about it—but it won’t work out so well before the judgment seat of Christ. Real wisdom is shaped by God’s character: “righteousness, justice, equity.” Sneaky bad guys may *seem* to get ahead, but they don’t. Real wisdom will teach you to live God’s way, in God’s world, to receive God’s eternal blessing.

Wisdom, insight, instruction, character: God wants to pour all this and more into your life through the book of Proverbs! Do you want it?



2. WHO IS WISDOM FOR?

Who is the intended audience of Proverbs? Today's reading mentions three major categories of people who can benefit from God's wisdom in this book.

The simple (4). In Proverbs, to be "simple" does not mean that you are dumb, or intellectually deficient. It means that you are a beginner in life. We might say that you are "green," a little naive. You don't know what you don't know. The simple person only understands life at a superficial level, not grasping its complexities. So he may love God and have the best intentions, but because he lacks experience, he still blunders into all kinds of trouble. "The prudent sees danger and hides himself, but the simple go on and suffer for it (22:3)." This poor, simple guy wasn't *trying* to rebel. He *didn't know* he was in danger! But in the end, he still suffered.

At some level, all of us are simple. We are oblivious about what it takes to have a good marriage, clueless about handling money with wisdom, or how to deal with certain difficult or deceitful people. We often just follow the herd around us when it comes to thinking about sex and dating, or technology, or parenting, or alcohol. Proverbs is warning us that it is dangerous to be simple. We can be as sweet as we can be, but still blow past God's flashing orange danger signs, straight into a minefield. We may get a leg blown off, not understand why, and then turn around and do the same thing next week. Proverbs offers the simple *prudence*. Caution. Safety. That's what we need!

The young (4). Everyone can benefit from Proverbs, as we will see. But more than any other book in the Bible, Proverbs targets young people. The whole book is framed as a father having a conversation with his teenage son, preparing him to step out onto the road of adult life and make independent choices. To be young is glorious (Prov 20:29)! You have so much going for you: energy, strength, passion, expectancy. But one thing you lack is *experience*. You can't help that. But it means that you are constantly flying blind in brand-new situations. For most of us, that means we have to learn a lot of hard lessons by trial and error—about credit card debt, toxic friends, procrastination, or over-committing, etc. We've all got scars to prove it.

Proverbs offers a better way. As a young person, you can have your Creator tell you about life *ahead of time*. Your Bible, and specifically Proverbs, is like a cheat-code that gives you the advantages of age while still being young (see Ps 119:97–100)! God's wisdom gives *discretion* to the youth: the ability to differentiate between subtle choices that fool most people—not just between good and evil, but good, better, and best.

The wise can benefit from God's wisdom (5). Maybe it has been a long time since someone classified you as a “youth.” Maybe you are already mature, and understand some things in God's Word. Great! But we're never as wise as we think. Each life-stage brings to us challenges that we have never personally faced before. Whatever your season of life or level of growth, God wants to *increase* your learning! Don't get proud, stale, or lazy. Don't let your heart drift in your latter years like the once-wise Solomon did (1 Kings 11:4). Let's each ask God to do a fresh work in our lives. In Christ, the best years of our lives can be ahead of us!

God's life-changing wisdom is available to *everyone*. You only need to be humble and teachable to get an abundant life. Let's crucify our pride, and sit at Jesus' feet.



3. THE ONLY ACCESS-POINT

At the beach condo, there was only one way to the ocean. A long, iron fence guarded the shore, with a single gate that opened to a narrow boardwalk. At times, this frustrated me. If I had a heavy load to carry, or if I had to go back to the room for something, there was no direct route from my door to my spot on the beach. I had to make the trek, like everybody else, to that one, lone gate. There was no use getting mad about it; if I wanted to enjoy the ocean, there was only one way to access it. I had to submit.

In a similar way, there is only one access-point to a skillful, happy life. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, your only available gateway to true success in this world. With the fear of the Lord, there is no limit to how fruitful and fulfilling life can be. Without it, you're doomed before you start. The "fear of the Lord," a phrase found throughout both the Old and New Testaments, means that you take God seriously. You know that "The eyes of the Lord are in every place, keeping watch on the evil and the good (15:3)." The fear of God is not exactly cringing "terror," though this kind of fear does play a role. How could it not, if God created you, upholds you, and in the end will eternally judge you (Matt 10:28)? Surely, this is cause for trembling and awe.

Here in Proverbs, to "fear the Lord" means acknowledging that Yahweh is God, and you are his creature. He runs this world, and he makes the rules. Fearing the Lord means accepting that God's moral order is as

inescapable as the law of gravity. You can fight it if you want to, but it will be far easier to just get on board. Practically, the fear of the Lord boils down to obeying the Lord: “Whoever despises the word brings destruction on himself, but he who reveres the commandment will be rewarded (13:13).” It means trusting the Lord with all your heart, and acknowledging him in all your ways (3:5–6). Why wouldn’t I? This same God sent his Son to the cross to pay for all my foolish sins, and reconciled me to himself.

Once you settle this issue of fearing the Lord, a world of wisdom opens up to you! Or, you can go another route.

The one person who *can’t* benefit from God’s wisdom in Proverbs is the fool (1:7). This person thinks he can live in God’s world on his own terms: deciding what is best, doing what he wants, making his own rules, evading any consequences. A fool may claim to believe in God, but lives as if *he* is God. She has *no* time for wisdom or instruction, but despises it as something small, cheap, irrelevant, unworthy. The fool smirks, laughs, rolls his eyes, scrolls on her phone, and wonders when the parent or the preacher will finally shut up so she can move on. If that’s you, I’m afraid this book won’t help much. Life will first have to wound you deeply. But even that won’t always do it. Fools often suffer consequences, blame everyone else, learn nothing, then die and go to hell. “When a man’s folly brings his way to ruin, his heart rages against the Lord (19:3).”

Are you on that road today? God even now offers you a fresh start, through the cross of Christ. Like the fool who died next to Jesus, you can ask yourself, “Do you not fear God (Luke 23:40),” and cast your life on the mercies of this crucified Savior. *He* is the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6).



4. VOICES AND CHOICES

The church I serve meets at a place in our community that locals call “The Fork.” Just past our building, two long roads, Cravens and Oak Grove, split off from one another to form a “V,” or a fork. When you come to that dividing point, you have to decide which road you will take. Obviously, you can only choose one. Each road leads in different directions, through different parts of the community, ending up in different destinations and offering different experiences. The road you take makes all the difference.

For the first of many times, this simple image appears in Proverbs today: life is like traveling a road. Out on this road of life, we are constantly making choices about which path we will take, which direction we will follow, who our companions will be, and more. Many of these choices seem small at the time, but taken together they determine our experience, our destination, and the kind of person we will be when we arrive. The goal of Proverbs is to show us how to travel the road of life skillfully. It begins in today’s passage, as we overhear a father warning his son about voices and choices.

Picture a family living room where a dad is having a heart-to-heart talk with his son—it could also be a mom having an important conversation with her daughter. This young person is about to gain independence. He has been raised in a godly home, a safe cocoon of love, discipline, and Bible-teaching. Mom and dad have made the decisions, and have always been there to guide, teach, correct, and shield. Through example and instruction, they have presented to her a life of godly wisdom.

This kind of life is like a graceful garland, an Olympic victor's wreath crowning an athlete's head, or beautiful pendants adorning your neck. This godly lifestyle is not only morally clean, but happy, beautiful, and honorable. But now, this young woman will walk out their front door, onto the open road of life, and make her own choices—and hear many other voices.

On the road of life, this young person will encounter new people with agendas very different from those of his parents. This dad puts it bluntly: many of them are “sinners (10).” Isn't that a little judgy? Aren't we *all* sinners who need a Savior? Yes, of course. But some people's lives are defined by rejecting God and his ways. Their outlook is shaped, not by the fear of the Lord, but by a world in rebellion against God. This young man needs to recognize that when he sees it. Correctly evaluating people and their perspectives is a vital skill on the road of life, because the people you meet will attempt to influence you. Whether openly or subtly, they will try to “*entice*” you, to go with them and to be like them. If the son listens to the wrong voices, this dad can't shield him from the consequences. So *you've* got to decide which voice you will follow. Will you act on the godly wisdom you've received—treasuring it like a gold medal—or will you forsake it? The dad can't decide for him. This is a decision that we all must make.

There is wisdom here for parents, reminding us about our call to prepare our children for the road of life. This duty requires us, first, to model godly wisdom for them in our own daily lives. It means taking the time to have regular conversations with them about the road ahead—including straight-talk about the various people and influences they will encounter. It will also involve making them take responsibility for their actions, and helping them understand that the choices they make always come with consequences.

And there is also wisdom here for us all, wherever we may be on the road of life. What voices will you listen to today? What choices will you make? Only you can decide.



5. DISSECTING PEER PRESSURE

Did you ever watch the old movie *Pinocchio*? It's about a wooden marionette who dreams of being a real boy. One day, he leaves the safety of the woodshop, where his loving creator, Gippetto, protected him from the harsh realities of the world. Out in the town, Pinocchio is exhilarated by his new freedom, singing, "I've got no strings to hold me down!" But he is also terribly naive, completely unprepared for the world. He is easily influenced, manipulated, and deceived.

That's the picture the father paints for his son today. There he is, freshly scrubbed, whistling a happy tune, strolling down a sunny path. When out of the shadows, a group of cigar-smoking thugs calls out to him, recruiting him for their gang. Before he knows what's happening, they have swept him along into a life of violent crime. Honestly, it sounds a little extreme to us. But even if you're never been tapped by "The Bloods," this passage helps us see how peer pressure taps the deepest desires of our hearts. If we don't understand this, we will be vulnerable on the road of life.

The desire for acceptance. Notice all the "let us's" and "we's!" They offer inclusion. *Come with us. Let's go. We'll have fun.* This is powerful! No one likes to be excluded. We all like feeling wanted, invited, befriended, brought into a circle of cool, smart, talented, or attractive people. God planted that desire for community and love deep within us, when he made us in his own Triune image (Gen 1:26-27). But we can also idolize the acceptance of our fellow human beings, to the point that we do

foolish and ungodly things to gain it or to keep it. We can change who we are, or do what we know we shouldn't. You can make your life crazy as a people-pleaser, saying "yes" to every request. You can ignore church friends when you are out with your school friends. You can spend money that you don't have to impress people you don't even like. You can go along with all kinds of gossip, meanness, and reckless behavior just to fit in and be part of the group. The desire for acceptance is remarkably powerful.

The desire for autonomy. Reading it in cold black-and-white, the gang's offer sounds crazy: *let's lie in wait for blood! Let's kill innocent people and take their money!* But there is an element of the proposal that is also exciting, because they offer *autonomy*: self-rule. Be your own boss. *Don't be a kid doing what mom and dad say. Make your own rules!* Rebellion can be thrilling. Breaking the rules makes you feel free, powerful, in-control (Gen 3:1-6). "*Let's blow up this mailbox with a cherry bomb!*" Kids curse because it makes them feel big. Disrespecting authority always feels cooler than respect. Part of the appeal of illegal drugs or drunk driving is "I make my own rules."

The desire for acquisition. They promise fast, easy money: *One quick job and we'll all be rich!* A desire for gain is not all bad; Proverbs will have a lot to say about the blessing of wealth. But God's way of gain is through honest work and wise management, building wealth over time (13:11). Godly wisdom also helps us keep money in its proper perspective, understanding that it can't solve all of our problems, but that we can use it to generously bless other people. Out on the road of life, we will be tempted to look for unwise and immoral short-cuts to wealth. We can very easily make money our god, and be willing to hurt people in order to get it or to keep it.

The wisdom of our passage helps us understand how the world preys on strong desires that we all have to turn us off wisdom's path. Can you see this in your own life?



6. SEEING PAST THE BAIT

Fishing is a major attraction in the little river town where I live. I know some very skilled fishermen with high-powered bass boats, high-tech depth finders, and other state-of-the-art equipment. I have personally never advanced past buying a box of crickets from the gas station. But the basic concept behind fishing remains the same: if you want to catch a fish, your bait has to look good enough to hide the hook.

That's what the father explains to his son in our passage. The world dangles many shiny lures and juicy worms in front of us. Godly wisdom helps us see that sharp, barbed hook hiding behind it. Wisdom equips us with those life survival-skills we learned about in 1:1-3, like discernment (the ability to spot subtle differences between alternatives), insight (the power to see past deceptive appearances into the true nature of a situation), and prudence (a shrewd caution that keeps us out of danger). We need all of these skills when the crowd tries to lure us away.

There is a standard we can trust (15-16). “My son, do not walk with them; hold back your foot from their paths, for their feet run to...*evil*.” When the pressure is on, don't forget that you belong to a God with a standard of good and evil. In that moment of temptation, it will feel so good to be included, so exciting to be autonomous, so smart to acquire some fast cash—and that exhilaration will cloud your judgment. You will convince yourself that it's right to go along with the group, but there is nothing morally cloudy about the situation from God's

perspective. What conforms to his revealed will is good; what doesn't is evil. One day, long after this crowd is gone, you'll be left to answer to him. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (1:7). If you know his standard, and remember you are always before him, you'll stay out of a lot of trouble.

There is a stupidity we can reject (17–19). These young men plotting to steal and kill are not just indulging in evil...they're *stupid*. Why? They think they can defy the moral order of God's universe and win. Most of us realize that we can't ignore the physical laws of the universe. If you jump off a roof, you immediately pay for defying the law of gravity. But God has also established moral laws for his world, and they are just as ironclad. The difference is that the consequences of breaking God's moral laws are not always immediate—they tend to work out on a sowing-and-reaping timetable. But no one gets around them; there is always a payday coming. That's what these violent thugs don't understand. They're blowing through life, taking what they want, and laughing it all off. They don't realize that they are "lying in wait for their *own* blood." It never ends well when you try to live in God's world on your own terms: "Such are the ways of *everyone who is greedy for unjust gain*; it takes away the life of its possessor." Even a bird has the self-preservation instinct to avoid a net in plain sight. Will you?

This opening conversation reminds us that the stakes are high out on the road of life. Godly wisdom points out the wrong exits ahead of time, to spare us a great deal of pain. When you take a wrong detour, sometimes you can turn around later, but you lose time and still have to pay. Particularly in this area of peer pressure, the best course is to decide *now* what roads you will and will not take—not waiting until the moment arrives. But even the wisest among us will need a lot of mercy. Jesus is the only Perfect Son who always chose the right way. We can bring our ruined lives to him. He can restore what we have damaged, and he can lead us in a whole new way.



7. MEET WISDOM

Like many of you, I have learned a lot from YouTube. Just the other day, I found myself in a home repair project I had never faced. I pulled out my phone and summoned four or five videos that walked me through the process, step-by-step. Incredibly helpful. I got the information I needed, put my phone back in my pocket, and went about my life.

This is just the kind of relationship that many of us want to have with Jesus. Obviously, we want him to forgive our sins and take us to heaven when we die. But other than that, we would really prefer him to leave us alone until we run into some kind of problem. We can then pull him out of our pockets, and get the quick life-hack we are looking for. Afterward, we can put him back away until next time, while we keep managing life on our own terms. But Jesus is not your smart phone. He's the Lord. And he is not interested in helping you comfortably ignore him 90% of the time. He will give you his wisdom, but he demands a relationship. Submit to him. Walk with him. Listen to him. Learn from him. Let him change you over time into a more godly person. This is how Jesus makes us wise. This is the father's message to his son today.

Out on the road of life, this young man will make all kinds of choices. These will determine his destination. But the most important choice he will make is whether or not he will walk that road in relationship with Wisdom. The father describes God's wisdom today, for the first time,

as a person. We might call her “Lady Wisdom.” She is strong, brilliant, elegant, and no-nonsense. She understands life in all its complexity. She is aware of every opportunity and danger that lie ahead. She knows exactly how to steer this young man to safety, success, and satisfaction. We will meet her again, in chapters 8–9. But today, she steps onto the stage for the first time, offering to accompany the father’s son on his journey of life. She will be his personal teacher, mentor, and guide. Before the son takes one step down the road of adulthood, the father begs him to place himself under Wisdom’s care.

This is all a metaphor. There is no actual person out there named “Lady Wisdom.” The father is poetically describing what it’s like to know, submit to, and apply the truth of God’s Word to your life. It’s like having the ultimate advisor at your side at all times, providing you with reliable counsel in every situation you encounter.

Or *is it* just a metaphor? When we get to the New Testament, Jesus Christ reminds his listeners of this person named Wisdom—and applies it to himself (Matt 11:19). He astonishes the crowds by his wisdom and mighty works (Matt 13:54). He declares that, in his arrival “something greater than Solomon is here (Matt 12:42).” In Jesus “are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Col 2:3),” and when we put our trust in Jesus, all of that wisdom becomes available to us: “And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God...(1 Cor 1:30).” When we not only hear his teaching, but do it, we are building our lives on a solid foundation that will survive any storm (Matt 7:24–29).

There really *is* a person named Wisdom, who really does want to travel the road of life with you. So when you hear Lady Wisdom calling out to this young man in the following verses, just consider it as the voice of Jesus. But brace yourself: what he has to say may surprise you!



8. AN OFFER YOU SHOULDN'T REFUSE

I blinked in the morning light of my high school parking lot. I had just stayed up all night with my fellow graduates, at the “Project Graduation” event on the night of our commencement ceremony. The grads were all happy to spend a final few hours together; the adult sponsors were all happy to keep us off the street. Now I said a groggy goodbye to my friends, and staggered to my Honda Accord with the mini-fridge I had won. It hit me as I drove off that I was now a high school graduate, stumbling into adulthood. *What happens next?* In our text today, Wisdom shows up at this very moment in our young man’s life. She has an offer that he needs to hear.

Wisdom’s offer is urgent (20-21). Wisdom is not subtle: she trails him through the streets, crying aloud, raising her voice—this is restraining order material! But Jesus Christ is trying to get your attention just like this, right now. In the Bibles laying around your house. In the godly advice he sends through wise people. In those sermons that sound like Charlie Brown’s teacher. In countless living examples he parades past you each day. In a thousand ways, Jesus is urgently trying to get through to you. Why? Because our actions carry real consequences, and we only get one life to glorify God. Meanwhile, many other voices call out to us, too. So he shouts to be heard!

Wisdom’s offer is merciful (22). Jesus extends his wisdom to the *simple*, who let the crowd do their thinking for them. And to scoffers, who

have treated God's wisdom like a joke. He is for fools, so wise in their own eyes that you can tell them nothing. Can we admit we have been all three? We have all made choices that seemed brilliant at the time, but turned out to be so dumb. We have all been overly-influenced by unworthy people. We are all easily deceived and blinded by pride. Yet when more mature people try to help us, we hate it! We get defensive and offended. We stiffen our necks, *keep* doing it our way, and make it all worse. Why? We don't just have a knowledge problem, but a heart problem. We "*love* being simple...*delight* in scoffing...*hate* knowledge." Incredibly, Jesus still *wants* to get involved with us, even after we've rejected him time and time again. "*You're making life so much harder than it has to be,*" he says. "*How long will you keep this up? Is your life really so great with you managing it?*"

Wisdom's offer is simple (23). To get a great life, you don't have to be smart, educated, talented, attractive, athletic, or well-connected. You just have to be a) humble, and b) decisive. Humble enough to let Jesus show you where you've been walking the wrong way, and decisive enough to turn and let him lead you in a new way. "If you turn at my reproof:" your entire future hangs on those six words. If you will turn, here's what Jesus promises: "*Behold I will pour out my Spirit to you. I will make my words known to you.*"

The Creator of the universe will become your personal guide. He will show you how to navigate his world with skill and success. He will teach you how to avoid the pits that others fall into, and manage those problems that are unavoidable. He'll teach you self-control, show you how to speak to your spouse and raise your kids, and how to dodge bankruptcy. He will help you identify toxic people, earn promotions, and not get burned by gossips, liars, and manipulators. You can enjoy God's gift of sex without the world's brokenness, manage your time, and appear smarter than you are. He will even put his own Spirit inside of you, and give you the desire, power, and perseverance to stay on wisdom's path for all your days. What an offer! What are you waiting for?



9. STRAIGHT-TALK EXPRESS

Back when Senator John McCain was running for President of the United States, one of his campaign buses came through my town. I can still remember the words that were plastered across the side of that long charter bus: “The Straight-Talk Express.” The idea was that you could trust McCain: he was going to barrel across the country telling the truth, even if it was hard to hear. McCain lost that election, but his slogan always comes back to me when I read today’s text. Wisdom deals out some hard truth about what this young man’s life will be like if he chooses to ignore her. She is not particularly gentle about it, but that’s not what we need. We need the straight-talk express.

Wisdom is honest about what we can expect. Wisdom has made us an incredible offer to teach us to live skillfully, according to God’s design. But many of us aren’t interested. We are too busy to be bothered. Too proud to be corrected. Too unserious to think that we need it. So Wisdom tells us how that is going to play out. It may take a while to develop, but a storm is coming in your life (27). It will be sudden, violent, and destructive. She is describing the natural consequences of ignoring God’s way in God’s world. The fallout is as predictable as ignoring the physical laws of the universe.

For instance, if you are harsh and demeaning to your kids, they will want to get as far from you as they can, as fast as they can. If you can’t control your wants, you’ll end up buried in debt. If you use people, no one will be there when you need them. If you gossip, no one will trust

you. If you are negative, grumpy, or arrogant, you'll also be lonely. If you rely on alcohol to cope, it will dominate you. If you can't submit to authority, you'll wind up in jail. If you hang out with fools, they'll drag you into their drama. If you're lazy and irresponsible, you'll stay broke. If you quit what you start, break promises, and don't follow through, no one will take you seriously. Wisdom is honest about what to expect when you ignore her: you can already write the script.

Wisdom is also honest about who we can blame. When our world comes caving in because of our foolish choices, Wisdom says that she'll be there...to laugh at us. Not what we expect from Jesus! But then again, *we are* laughing at Wisdom when we ignore her outstretched hand and leave her standing in the streets. The painful results in our lives vindicate that she was right all along. When negative consequences for our choices come down in our lives, we all instinctively want to blame everyone and everything else. But Wisdom won't let us! *31: they shall eat the fruit of their way, and have their fill of their own devices.* You are simply eating the meal that you prepared. *Bon appetit*, big boy. I don't remember this from *Jesus Calling*! What Jesus says is Wisdom can be tough to hear. But owning our sin is the only way out of it.

Wisdom is honest about why we should act. Why is it so urgent that we respond to Wisdom now? Because there is no promise that you'll be able to turn it around later (28). Jesus' words always fit the occasion. He has ample grace for humble people *after* our sin has broken us (Js 4:6). But here, he's talking *before* we blow our lives up, and *that* calls for urgency: "Don't assume you can ignore me now, then run to me to fix it all later." The Bible calls that "presumption." One way these consequences work out, is you reach crisis moments in life when you *desperately* need wisdom...and it's just not there. You never cultivated it all those years, and now there's no time to catch up.

Are you ready to listen to Wisdom?



10. LET'S MAKE THIS SIMPLE

I was visiting the fast-food restaurant Cookout with my family. After they had all placed their orders, I stepped to the counter, and the cashier directed me to the milkshake menu. A milkshake sounded great, but there were 80 different flavor options! There's mint chip, caramel, hot fudge, strawberry, fresh peach...how could I possibly choose?! I stood there, frozen like those ice cream treats I couldn't decide between. Or there have been all those times I've pulled into the Taco Bell drive through (I'm not too proud to admit it), only to remember that I like everything there. I can't really explain the difference between a Gordita and a Chalupa, and what's the best bang for my buck...and I'm stuck, hobbling between opinions, as the car line behind me stacks up.

Too many options can paralyze us. Sometimes we just need someone to boil it down to one, simple, either/or decision. This is what the Bible's Wisdom literature does for us. Our lives often seem so complex. The issues are hazy. We don't know what's best. Wisdom literature serves us by clarifying what really matters in life. It simplifies the issues that we tend to overcomplicate. We find a classic example of this in Psalm 1, which tells us that there are really only two ways to live. You are either the blessed man, delighting in the Law of the Lord, or you are being carried along by the course of this world. Which is it? Jesus often employs this tactic: you are either serving God or money; you can't do both (Matt 6:24). You are on the broad way that leads to destruction, or the narrow way that leads to life (Matt 7:13-14). Where are your feet?

In our text today, Lady Wisdom confronts our young man with that same, simple, either/or decision. At the threshold of the city gate, the road of his life stretching out before him, he can choose to travel one of two paths.

The first path is called “*complacency*.” That’s an important word. It does not mean that you are vocally rejecting God’s wisdom. You aren’t mocking people who go to church and take holiness seriously. You aren’t pitching Gideon Bibles in the trash can. If you are complacent, you are simply fine with how you are. You don’t see why Wisdom is so urgent. Applying the things she says would require painful change, and you’re not sure it’s really worth all that trouble. Plus, you know plenty of people who think just like you, and they seem very happy. The complacent path does not necessarily “feel” like you are scornfully rejecting Jesus. In fact, you may be happy to quietly listen and nod at what he says. But you’re also not going to change anything that you’re doing. The path of complacency won’t feel like rebellion; it just feels easy. And that’s what makes it so dangerous. Wisdom says “*the complacency of fools destroys them.*”

The second path is called “*correctable*.” On this path, you travel through life in the company of Jesus. You will find that he won’t flatter or coddle you. He’s the Lord, after all. So he will tell you what to do. He will tell you that you are wrong, *a lot*. He will be constantly adjusting your perspective and behavior. But he will also love you like you’ve never been loved. He will forgive all your sins, pick you up when you stumble, and lead you on level ground until he gets you home safe (33).

Proverbs 1:33 inspired one of Jesus’ most famous wisdom stories, in Matthew 7:24–27, which then inspired a song many of us learned as a child: “*The rains may come down and the floods came up, but the house on the rock stood firm.*” Are you building your life, *right now*, on the solid wisdom of Jesus Christ? It doesn’t get simpler than that.



11. KILLING COMPLACENCY

The stack of limbs on my trailer had grown large. It had been a long afternoon of yard cleanup, and I was ready to haul it all away to the dump. As I looked over my load, I considered tying it down. But the branches were awkward to secure. I only had about a five-minute drive, and I was in a hurry. "It'll be fine," I told myself. As you can guess, I was soon parked on the shoulder of the highway, picking up limbs, dodging cars and frustrating my fellow motorists. It was not "fine!" The job took twice as long as it should have, and was ten times more stressful than it needed to be. Because of *complacency*.

Complacency is the careless attitude that says "it'll be fine" when we know we ought to apply ourselves, give some effort, and make a change. In Proverbs 1:32, the father tells his son that *complacency* kills people. It's the outlook that defines the fool. You don't have to set your heart on evil to wreck your life. Just be OK with the way you are right now: too busy to listen to wisdom, too proud to receive correction, too lazy to make adjustments. Proverbs 2 calls us to replace complacency with urgency.

Our text is built on an "if-then" structure. The father is explaining the *conditions* of a successful and satisfied life in God's world. That kind of life is not automatic. God freely offers you his wisdom, but you have to make a personal investment. You won't drift into wisdom by accident, absorb it by growing up in a godly home, or fall into it by attending a great church. You and I remain fools until we make a personal choice

to apply God's truth. Just listen to all the "take action" words the father heaps onto his son: "*receive* my words; *treasure up* my commandments; *make* your ear attentive; *incline* your heart to understanding; *call out* for insight, *raise* your voice for understanding; *seek* it like silver and *search* for it like gold." Nothing passive there!

God *wants* to change you, help you, lead you. But if you treat him as an option, he will not waste his wisdom on you. Your Creator is offering you his perspective on life, giving you the inside track on navigating his world with success. Yet we often treat this incredible gift like cleaning out your gutters—I'll get around to it when there's nothing better to do! So let's admit that the main reason we aren't wiser at this point in our lives is that we frankly have not cared enough to do anything about it. We have prioritized everything *but* growing in spiritual maturity, and it shows. But Jesus offers a fresh start for the complacent today: wherever you are, you can begin to seek *first* the Kingdom of God (Matt 6:33). You can take that passion you have been pouring into your business, appearance, athletic career, house, hobbies, and apply it to *knowing God*.

If you have to make changes to seek the Lord like that, make them. Ditch those ungodly influences. Eliminate the worthless distractions. Say "no" to some good things so you can say "yes" to the one thing needful. Study your Bible *with urgency*. Show up to church *engaged*. Surround yourself with mature, godly people. Ask God to give you a humble and correctable heart. *Those* people get wisdom, and it completely transforms their lives. That's a promise! "*Then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God. For the Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding (5–6).*" Make God your priority, and he will make you his priority. "Draw near to God, and he *will* draw near to you (Js 4:8)." "You will seek me and find me when you seek with all your heart (Jer 29:13)." God is eager to pour his generous wisdom into your life; he's just waiting for you to get serious. Are you ready?



12. HOW WISDOM FORMS US

As a child, I loved it when my parents pulled through the drive-through of our bank to deposit a check. I watched in fascination as the little plastic capsule traveled through the system of pneumatic tubes, from the bank to our car, and back again. Then, when we got our final deposit ticket, there was usually a sucker for me. As an adult, I still like watching those tubes, and I also appreciate the efficiency of the whole process. I don't have to get out of the vehicle and walk into the building. I just whip through the line, transact my business, and then I'm back on my way—with a Dum-Dum.

A lot of us would like to get wisdom from God like that. We want to spend 95% of our time just driving here and there, doing our thing, neglecting him and his Word. But when a crisis hits—when we run into a problem we can't handle, or face a big decision, or feel overwhelmed by life—suddenly, we become intensely interested in discovering “God's will” for our lives. So we want to whip into a drive-through, punch in our order, and have God zip his answer to us, so we can then get right back to life on our terms.

It doesn't work that way. If God just shot me a tube with answers on demand like that, I might get some helpful information, but I would also remain the same selfish, unwise, and immature person that I was before. God wants so much better for us! He is not just dispensing information; he is after our transformation.

This is what Proverbs 2:7–10 describes: “he stores up wisdom *for the*

upright; he is a shield to those who walk in integrity, guarding the paths of justice, and watching over the way of his saints.” Do you hear what God is saying to us? “If you want my wisdom in your life, you can’t just pull into the drive-through whenever it suits you. You have to put your whole life under my management.” This starts by attending to what he has already told us. Read your Bible, listen to it preached, and put it into practice. He has revealed enough wisdom for us in his Word to cover most of what we will face in life.

Instead of worrying about “finding God’s will” in life’s occasional, “right-left” choices (applying for this job, going to this school, buying this house), commit to doing God’s will in life’s everyday, “right-wrong” choices. Pursue with all your heart what God has *already* told you his will for you is: living *upright* before him and staying on paths of *justice* (obeying his commands, loving your neighbor); walking in *integrity* (living to please God whether anyone else is watching or not); following the way of *his saints* (walking through life in the company of Jesus and the rest of his people). If you will focus on that basic godly lifestyle, God will make sure you have the wisdom you need when you’ve got to make a non-moral decision on a Tuesday afternoon (Rom 12:1–2).

That’s 2:9–10: “*Then you will understand righteousness and justice and equity, every good path; for wisdom will come into your heart, and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul.*” Instead of sending you occasional messages in a tube, God wants his wisdom to *come into your heart*. He wants to change you *down deep*, through a daily relationship with him. He wants to shape you into a person of maturity, character, and understanding. Then, wherever you go, whatever you face, and whoever you encounter, the wisdom you need will be *inside you*. If you meet a really, wise godly person, that didn’t happen over night. They spent years pouring themselves into the Lord, humbly receiving correction, and letting God’s Word shape them. That could be you!



13. DODGING LIFE'S TRAPS

Dennis Rainey of Family Life Ministries once described his “graduation ceremony” for his 6th grade Sunday School class. He spread a variety of animal traps all over the gym floor: mouse traps, rabbit traps, even bear traps. Rainey stood on one side of the gym, and placed a 6th grader on the other—blindfolded. Then Rainey would call out, “OK, Tommy, walk to me.” Obviously, the kid was in danger! But then came the big point. Rainey also had the 6th-grader’s dad there that day, who would call out, “Wait, Tommy! Let me guide you!” Then the dad would place his child’s hand on his shoulders, and weave him safely to the other side. It all made for a powerful object lesson: life is loaded with dangers that we can’t see or anticipate (especially as we are growing up). God provides us with wiser, godly people, like parents, to help steer us through them.

The father in Proverbs is telling his son the same thing in our reading today. Life in this fallen world is full of hidden traps. Some of them might just sting a little bit for about a week. Others might take off a leg. And some are so deadly that you don’t come back from them at all. All of this only highlights the value of God’s wisdom coming into your life, as we described yesterday. Wisdom will not ensure a perfect life, but it will protect you from a lot of the traps that the people around you are blundering into.

Wisdom will protect you from the trap of foolish associates (11–15). This is a father talking to a son, so he warns of falling in with the wrong kind of men—but this could just as easily be about a daughter

avoiding the wrong kind of females. In life, you will run into circles of people who you would like to join. They seem cool, successful, popular, attractive. You naturally want to associate with them. This is *not* just a strong pull for teenagers. Finding friends is a gift from God, but this particular circle has a serious problem. Their words are “perverted,” crooked, not aligned with God’s wisdom. They are hurtling down a path of foolishness. Maybe they say cruel, cutting things about others, or are obsessed with money, or maybe they can’t relax unless they’re consuming alcohol or pills. They may say that they are Christians, but God’s Word is not shaping their values or behavior. When you are with them, you seem to care a lot less about what God wants, too. Left to yourself, you will step into this trap, and be influenced in all the wrong ways. But God can make you wisely independent.

Wisdom will also protect you from the trap of forbidden desire (16–19). This “forbidden woman” is any potential sexual relationship that God says is off-limits. Maybe you are already married to someone else, or she is. Maybe you’re both single, but it’s just a bad idea. Maybe you know this person through school, your office, or the gym. Whatever the details, this forbidden person’s words are smooth. She laughs at your jokes. He compliments you. She pays attention to you, and makes you feel noticed and attractive. You start dreaming of a fabulous life together. But it’s just a trap. In this case, the father is saying: *“This lady is telling you exactly what she told the guy she’s married to! Now she’s cheating on him, and you think she’s going to be devoted to you?”* If this person “forgets her covenant with God,” nothing will be sacred to her. Her house sinks down to death, and countless fools have wandered in, never to be seen again. But not you. With God’s wisdom, you can run to safety like Joseph (Gen 39).

God’s wisdom will protect you like that, *all through your life* (20–22). Life is littered with traps in every season. Wisdom will keep you on the safe path, with Christ, all the way until you are home with him. Don’t you want that? Then it’s time to get to work.



14. ALL YOUR DAYS

I had always admired (and coveted) my neighbor's gorgeous grass. One day I asked him what it would take to get a lush lawn like he had. He smiled, and began detailing all the trees he'd cut and loads of top soil he'd trucked in. He described the soil samples, chemical treatments, careful maintenance, and years of patience. I realized that beneath that beautiful yard there were some massive, personal commitments.

In Proverbs 3, the father is not pointing out a lawn, but the life of a happy, contented man or woman. He has his act together. He and his wife love each other. Her kids want to be around her. He has good friends who would do anything for him. People respect her opinion. He sleeps well because he has a clean conscience. It's the life we all want—but it didn't just fall out of the sky. There is a deep commitment under the surface. God *wants* to give you a Proverbs 3 life: long, peaceful, favor with God and man, inner healing and refreshment, straight paths that wind up in the right place. But to get that kind of life, you need to commit it all to him: all your days (1–4) and all your ways (5–6).

The Proverbs dad tells his son today, "Until now, your mom and I have chosen God *for* you. We have taught you the Bible, taken you to church, required of you a standard of godly behavior. We have done all we can to press God's wisdom onto you from the *outside*. But now you must choose God's wisdom from the *inside*. You will either *forget* my teaching, or keep it *from the heart*. You will *forsake* steadfast love and faithfulness to the Lord, or you will choose to bind it around your neck

like a beautiful necklace, and write it on the tablet of your heart. It's one or the other and only you can choose." This is a choice that we all have to make—not only when we are leaving home, but in every new season of life. I must personally choose to follow God's wisdom.

In middle school, you don't have to be cruel to the weak, or prove how tough you are by filthy speech. You can be a godly middle schooler! In high school, you don't have to live a double-life. You don't have to rebel, party, and hook-up. You can love Christ! At eighteen, when graduates disappear from church after Senior Sunday, you don't have to drift, live selfishly, or get addicted to some substance. These can be your defining years with the Lord. When you get a family, you can make riches your god, envy everyone's stuff, sow anger at home, get too busy for God, and step out on your spouse. Or you can choose to fear the Lord. When you're an empty-nester and finally have time and money, you can make that season all about you—or you can make it your greatest season of service. When you retire, you don't have to stumble at the end like so many do. You don't have to be grouchy, critical, and self-pitying. You can thrive!

Commit all your days to Jesus! If you do, "*It will add length of days and years of life and peace to you* (2)." Life won't be perfect, but it will be peaceful. You won't restlessly run from one unsatisfying activity to the next. You won't be so anxious and miserable that you have to medicate with alcohol and prescription drugs. You won't cut your life short doing something stupid. But *you must choose the Lord*. Don't graduate from God. Don't follow Jesus in bursts. Make him your defining commitment all your days, and you will enjoy "favor and good success in the sight of God and man (4)." People will honor you, and God will smile on you, just as Jesus himself experienced (Luke 2:52).

So what will you choose today?



15. ALL YOUR WAYS

When I was in the fifth grade, my Wednesday night Bible teachers had our class memorize Proverbs 3:5–6. In the years since, I have learned that these are the most popular verses in Proverbs. Many Christians claim these as their “life verses.” These words are often printed on coffee mugs, t-shirts, and Hobby Lobby wall-hangings. But as familiar as these verses are, they are even more important than we know. Also a great deal more demanding than we think. They represent God’s blueprint for the successful and satisfied life. But to get that life, we must commit *all* our ways to him.

As Creator and Lord, God knows how life works best, and he has revealed this truth to us in his Word. The Bible not only addresses what we think of as “spiritual” matters, like sin, salvation, and morality. It speaks to every aspect of human life: our work and our words, our finances and emotions, sex and parenting, friendship and guidance. In his Word, God is saying to you: *I made you, I understand you, and I love you. So let me teach you how to thrive. Trust me with all your heart. Obey my word and follow my wisdom, not your own instincts and insights. Honor me in every part of your life, and I will lead you into abundant and eternal life.* That’s the promise of Proverbs 3:5–6. Every Christian immediately responds, “Amen! I love this verse!” But do we?

Of course, we love the part about God guiding us on straight paths. But in practice, committing *all* our ways to him seems a bit much. We prefer to manage certain areas of life ourselves. These might include

who I date, my attitude toward my parents, how I handle money or do my job, how I speak to people, or think about those who have wronged me. I don't want to "acknowledge" God's Lordship or consult his Word in these spheres, because I have already decided what I want to do. So in reality, I "trust in the Lord" with *some* of my heart, but much of it I hold back. I think of myself as obeying God, but actually I only obey him when his way seems reasonable, easy, popular—when it is already what I want to do, or if I don't think I know a better way.

So maybe Proverbs 3:5–6 aren't quite the cozy coffee-mug verses we thought. They challenge us all at a fundamental level: who is really in charge in my life? We must confess that we have often rewritten the verse: "trust in the Lord with *some* of your heart, lean mostly on *your own* understanding, acknowledge him in *some* of your ways." This is called being "wise in your own eyes (3:7)." We think that we know better than God, and this is at the heart of all sin (Gen 2:16–7; 3:1–7).

Today, the Proverbs father calls us back to life as God intended: humble, childlike trust that his ways are always best. As early in life as possible, settle in your heart that God can be trusted with *every* part of your life. Begin to "acknowledge him" in *all* your ways, honor him in *all* your choices, obey his Word however it speaks to you (see Col 3:17).

Are you holding back part of your life from him? When we try to blend our way with God's way, it makes our lives terribly complicated, divided, and unhappy. Embrace instead this beautiful simplicity: "*fear the Lord and turn away from evil (3:7).*" It really is so sweet to trust in Jesus, a relief to let him be Lord. When you do, "he will make your paths straight (6)." Life won't be perfect, but you will always end up right where you need to be, and save yourself a world of pain along the way (8). So go ahead; give him *all your ways*.



16. ALL YOUR MAZE

I have been officiating at wedding ceremonies for more than fifteen years now, about as long as I have been married myself. As time has gone by, the vows of the bride and groom have taken on a much deeper meaning for me: “...to have and to hold, for better or for worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, as long as we both shall live, till death do us part.”

In that powerful moment, we are acknowledging how incredibly unpredictable life is. This couple standing before me has made all sorts of exciting plans, but they have no idea what the future holds. Here in this beautiful, carefully coordinated ceremony, everything is unfolding just as they desired. But that illusion of control will vanish the moment that they drive away together. He *might* get that promotion, or his company may fold and he has to start all over again. They *may* travel the world together, or the duty of caring for parents may keep them locked down right there. Getting along with one another will some days feel effortless, and other days impossible. Of course, this is the point of the vows. They are committing to one another up front, before any of those unexpected turns. Wherever life may take them, their covenant with each other before God will sustain them.

The father is pressing the same message on his son today. Before he takes one more step down the unpredictable road of life, he needs to make a commitment. Whatever direction life may take. Whatever the season or set of circumstances. Down paths of prosperity (9–10) and hardship (11–12): walk with Jesus. You will know times of plenty and

times of want. There will be stretches on your journey when everything is going your way and stretches when it seems like nothing is. So before you pass through these, and everything in between, commit right now to walk with the Lord through it all.

Commit now to walk with Jesus when the good times roll (9–10). When you are young, healthy, and beautiful. When you are surrounded by a crowd of friends, have plenty of money in the bank, and all kinds of promising opportunities. *Most Christians can't handle this.* You begin to feel self-sufficient. You forget the Lord your God. You stop humbly acknowledging that it's all from him. Don't do that! Glorify God in prosperity! Enjoy his gifts! But trace them all back to his generous heart. Honor him with the first-fruits. Use his bounty to generously bless others. Learn to do that, and he will make sure that you always have enough. If anyone is cheerful, *let him sing praise* (Js 5:13)!

Commit also to walk with Jesus when life is hard (11–12). When your plans *don't* work out. When you're lonely, and work is frustrating. When you go through the pain of infertility, or marriage is a struggle, or you lose someone you love. You'll be tempted to think that God doesn't love you. You will want to *despise* what he's doing in your life, to get bitter, mean, discontented, despairing. But keep trusting God! He's your true Father, and he delights in you for Jesus' sake. He is always doing something productive in your life in these times, training you to maturity as his child—that's what "discipline" means. He is preparing you for a glorious destiny that you can't yet see. You won't understand what God is doing in your life at the moment. But in time, if you'll trust him, you will see that your Father was so wise and good, and that Jesus led you all the way.



17. WHAT ARE YOU CHASING?

Do you remember how Jacob acted when he met Rachel in the book of Genesis? The love-struck patriarch immediately tried to impress her by moving a giant stone from a well and giving her a drink. He broke into tears. He kissed her. He happily signed up for seven years of slave labor for her hand in marriage. He was a mess. But “Jacob loved Rachel (Gen 29:18),” and so he chased after her with all of his might.

The father in Proverbs knows that his son will spend his life chasing *something*: wealth, popularity, professional achievement, pleasure, fame, romance. *Something* will be the great prize that he quests after, and the father today tries to persuade him to make God’s wisdom that treasure. To know God and to walk with him, to gain his Creator’s true perspective on life—that is a goal worthy of a lifelong pursuit.

But this realistic dad also knows that “godly wisdom” is probably not at the top of a young man’s priority list. So he motivates his boy by explaining that chasing wisdom is in his own best interest: it will lead to the happiest, most satisfied life he could imagine. In fact, the father speaks here about wisdom as if she were a wonderful woman whose heart his son is working to win. “Throw yourself into the pursuit of God’s wisdom like Jacob chased after Rachel—passionately, relentlessly, joyfully! If you do catch wisdom, it will be the best thing that ever happened to you.”

Think about gold, silver, and jewels. All are beautiful, costly, rare. If I

handed you a treasure map that showed you where a huge cache of these treasures was buried, you'd tear off to go find it right now! Why? You understand their value. You would gain a tremendous profit in finding them. But God's wisdom is even *more precious*. The gain is far greater! "*Nothing you desire can compare with her* (15)." Any precious thing your heart hungers for fades before the supreme worth of God's wisdom.

Just consider what wisdom can do for you: "Long life is in her right hand; in her left are riches and honor (16)." Is this an ironclad promise? No. We can all think of wise, godly people who suffer deeply (a reality that the book of Ecclesiastes addresses). But generally speaking, submitting to God's wisdom will lead to a longer life—you at least won't cut it short by doing something stupid that God explicitly warned you about. Obeying God does not guarantee earthly riches and success, but applying biblical principles like hard work, honesty, treating people right, and doing your best for God's glory tends to get results. Listening to God's Word is like following the instruction manual for human life. It always turns out better in the end.

So why chase after God's wisdom? "Her ways are pleasantness, and her paths are peace (16)." In this life, we will always endure trouble of one kind or another. But life will be far more pleasant and peaceful when walking with God's wisdom. You will spare yourself so much of the chaos, heartache, and misery that inevitably come from rebelling against God's way. In the wasteland of our unhappy world, it will be like you have regained access to "the tree of life:" walking in fellowship with your Maker as he shows you how to live. Others will wonder why, even as they murmur at how "blessed," and happy you are (18). That sounds like a lifestyle worth chasing.

So what will you pursue today?



18. WHO ARE YOU CONSULTING?

I recently constructed an 8' x 10' greenhouse in our backyard. The ground sloped slightly where we wanted to place it, so I needed to put some extra thought into the foundation. I could have stumbled through it alone, relying on my limited judgment and learning by trial and error. Instead, I called my friend Jeff. He has done commercial excavation work for decades, often huge, complex projects in the middle of major cities. Jeff could take one look at my little job and know immediately what to do. He would also want to pitch in and help me do it. It would be a lot more fun, and turn out a lot better, with him on board. Why *wouldn't* I call him?

That's what the father is telling his son about seeking God's wisdom. We are talking here about the Creator who put together this intricate, awe-inspiring, delightful world. He thought of this amazing water cycle. He holds together all the diverse ecosystems that support specific types of plants and animals. He holds the earth at just the right tilt so that it does not freeze by being too far from the sun, or burn up by being too close. *God is really smart.* And somehow, he has taken a personal interest in helping you through your daily life. If he knows all the secrets of the universe—don't you think you should consult him about your spending habits, choosing the right friends, or getting along with co-workers? God can give you "sound wisdom and discretion (22)" in every area of your life! Why *wouldn't* you walk through this world attached to God's hip?

I realize that “sound wisdom and discretion” don’t sound too thrilling—especially if you are still a teenager like the young man who first received Proverbs. But don’t undersell these amazing gifts. They “will be life for your soul and adornment for your neck (22):” inner peace and outer beauty. Above all, wisdom and discretion will keep you *safe* in a dangerous world (23–26). Youth makes us feel invincible, but life quickly teaches us that we are not. Whether by our own, deliberate sin, or by naively stumbling into someone else’s trap, a lack of discretion gets us seriously hurt. We can find out too late what happens when we talk about folks behind their backs, mouth off to authority figures, get behind the wheel of a car intoxicated, or let uncontrolled anger rule our hearts. We can suffer from marrying the wrong person, sharing our heart with a gossip, or loaning money to an irresponsible friend. The longer I live, the more I yearn to walk in the sweet “safety” offered by God’s wisdom.

Ignoring God’s wisdom and playing by your own rules may sound like freedom, but it hobbles you in life. Consider the picture in 3:23–26. The man who rejects God’s Word is always looking over his shoulder, to see if his choices are catching up to him. He doesn’t sleep well, because he’s wondering if he has been discovered, or is dealing with the guilt of the people he has hurt, or is scheming about how to manage it all again tomorrow. Foolishness is exhausting.

With God’s wisdom, life still has its strains and stresses. But you can go to bed with a clear conscience, and wake up ready to stride into your future. How? “The Lord is your confidence.” The righteous are “as bold as a lion (28:1)!” There’s a lot to be said for that.

Don’t you want to live that way? So who are you consulting as you live your life?



19. LIKE A GOOD NEIGHBOR

I have had a variety of neighbors in my time. Some feed our pets when we're away; others have poisoned the neighborhood dogs. Some have pulled my lawnmower out of the ditch; others have screamed threats while waving a butcher knife in the air. Some go sledding with us on snow days; I have caught others peeping in my windows at night. Some keep an immaculate yard; others have had their property condemned for keeping a pool of open sewage in their backyard. Today's reading is about how to live among all sorts of people, in a variety of scenarios. These people may live in your neighborhood or apartment, or you may interact with them at school, work, or church. How does God's wisdom teach us to function well in community?

A paying neighbor (27–28). This first setup *could* be describing a neighbor with a need, coming to ask you for help. Maybe their car battery is dead, or they forgot their pencil for class, or they need help moving an appliance. If this is the situation, the counsel is simple: help them out. Don't withhold good from them. Don't get irritated by the infringement on your time or resources. Be a generous soul who does good to others, just as God is good to you (Psalm 104:27–28). After all, you will be the one needing help one day, and generosity has a way of coming back to you (see 11:24–26).

But it seems more likely that this Proverb is describing *you* as the needy neighbor. You have borrowed money, or a tool, or a book, and your generous neighbor would like to have it back. But you are tempted to

treat this loan lightly. It's not that you mean to steal from your neighbor, exactly, but you drag your feet on returning or repaying because you get busy and forget. This may seem like no big deal, but it's the kind of thing that strains relationships and gives you a bad reputation. So be a neighbor with integrity: pay back what you owe promptly, with gratitude, and, where appropriate, with interest (i.e., return that borrowed pickup truck with a full tank of gas).

A peaceful neighbor (29–30). Now you have a neighbor dwelling peacefully beside you. He is just going about his business, smiling and waving when he sees you out. He means you no harm, and he also assumes that you mean him no harm. That simple relationship of trust is what holds communities together—so don't violate it. Be a trustworthy, peace-seeking neighbor. Don't steal from him. Don't mock her or speak evil about her behind her back out of envy or spite. At school, don't join in picking on or bullying someone who is just trying to live his life. Don't stir up drama and trouble and look for reasons to “contend” with someone. Be known for leading “a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way (1 Tim 2:2; 1 Thes 4:11–12).”

A patient neighbor (31–35). You may one day live among very ungodly people, who nevertheless seem to be “winning” at life. The most hateful girl at school will sometimes be the most popular, while you are forgotten or marginalized as you try very hard to do the right thing. That successful guy, making all the money and enjoying all the toys, is as crooked as a barrel of snakes. You will want to “envy” the wicked for their present prosperity. You may even be tempted to adopt his (or her) wicked ways. But wisdom reminds us that what we see in this moment is not the full story. Because the Lord has taken you into his confidence (32), you know that all our ways are before him, and he gives the final verdict on our lives. His curse is on the house of the wicked, but he will bless the dwelling of the righteous. So be patient. Stay humble. Fear the Lord. Trust his word.



20. KEEP CHOOSING WISDOM

My favorite musical group is a modern bluegrass band called The Steeldrivers (mega-famous country star Chris Stapleton got his start as their lead singer). Their song, “I Choose You,” reflects on how a strong marriage requires a daily decision to stay:

*I choose you
every day, in a hundred different ways;
I make the choice to stay
I could hit the open road, and run my life away,
but I choose you,
everyday*

The message of Proverbs 4 is that you can’t just make a one-time commitment to wisdom. Your walk with Jesus may start in an emotional decision at the end of a Sunday church service—but it will only be a start. You will have to get up the next morning and choose to submit to God’s wisdom again, for that day. Then you will have to do the same thing the next day, and the day after that. Keep going with wisdom, step-after-step down the road of life, through every season, until you reach the end. We have all known people who start wise, but end in foolishness (see 1 Kings 11). We have watched people choose wisdom for a while, or who have chosen wisdom in sporadic bursts. But to walk with skill, success, and satisfaction—you’ve got to choose wisdom every day.

Today, the Proverbs father brings up his own dad, who talked to him

about choosing wisdom just like this, twenty-five years earlier. This reminds us that, while the circumstances of life change, the principles of God's wisdom remain timeless. My great-grandfather could not imagine the iphone I carry around in my pocket. But the essentials of a wise life were the same for him in 1925 as they are for me today: your character, habits, associates, speech, self-control, sowing and reaping—these are still the make-or-break issues that we all deal with, because we're still living in God's world.

The Proverbs dad is saying, "The wisdom I'm sharing with you from the Bible is not my own personal preference; this is how God designed human life to work. God's wisdom has proven true in every generation. Everyone who has ever followed his way has found an abundant life. People who are honest, kind, humble, faithful to their spouse, generous, under control...are always happier! It works the other way, too. Everyone who has hung out with fools, cheated to get ahead, slandered, cared more about man's opinion than God's...they've all reaped chaos and sorrow. It was true in your Grand-dad's life. It has been true in mine. It will be true in yours. So consider wisdom's proven track record throughout history, and then decide for yourself. You can either step into this rich tradition of wise living, or you can think that you've found a better way. Your grandfather had to make that choice, and I did too. I want this so badly for you, but only you can decide to "*get wisdom, and whatever you get, get insight* (7)."

Here's one more way to look at it. If you make godly wisdom the goal of your life, it will be like "marrying up (8–9)." We all look at certain men and think, "How on earth did a bozo like that get a woman like her?" He may not bring much to the table himself, but he had enough sense to attach himself to an awesome lady who elevates his whole life. Wisdom *always* does that for those who prize her. Come find out for yourself.



21. THE PATH THAT BRIGHTENS

Picture a 16-year-old girl who decides to get serious with the Lord. At first, the benefits are not obvious. The decision immediately puts her out of step with her friends and broader culture. She feels awkward and lonely. But a light has dawned in her life. That light is still dim now, but as she walks with God year after year, it grows stronger. Her path gets *brighter*. At her 10-year high school reunion, she stands out by her stability, maturity, and joy. By her 20-year reunion, her sad and disillusioned peers are struck by her contentment, wisdom, and love for others; they begin to ask her questions. By the time this godly lady reaches her 50-year reunion, her life shines with a light as bright as noonday. "...transformed from one degree of glory to another (2 Cor 3:18)." But it all started with a single choice! That is the Christian life according to Proverbs.

Notice how many times "path" or "way" come up in our text. What point is the father driving home to us? The simple message that all of us are always going somewhere. None of us is standing still. With every choice that we make, we are either climbing up the bright path of God's wisdom, or we are shuffling down the dismal lane of folly. We rarely think of our daily choices as carrying that much significance. But when you choose gossip, or laziness, or anger, you are stepping down a *particular path*. Choose humility, honesty, self-control, you step down a *different path*. So which path are you on? Where is that path taking you? Who will you become if you stay on this trajectory?

We learn about the path of godly wisdom in 4:10–13. The moment that you choose to obey God will not always feel amazing. Your heart may still be full of doubts. Others may mock or question you. You may pay a steep cost for trusting God’s way. But try to look past that moment to the path that you are now on. On this path, you won’t cut your life short (10). You stay *upright*, avoiding trouble, keeping a clean conscience, and winning a good name (11). Your first steps on this path may be as wobbly and as graceless as a baby deer’s. But stay on it long enough, and eventually you will find that you can “run unhindered (12)!” You’re not tangled up in the world’s sinful chaos—you are living with energy, purpose, and freedom. That’s the path you want to be on!

But we should also consider the path of “wicked and evil (14–17).” It won’t feel as dramatic as that sounds when you choose to ignore God’s Word later today. It will feel low-key, reasonable, even smart. But one conscious step out of fellowship with God is a step down a very dark road. That’s why the father gets so urgent in these verses: *Avoid it. Don’t go on it. Turn away from it. Pass on.* We feel like we are taking control of our lives when we reject God’s authority, but we are really losing control. Sin promises freedom, but always enslaves us. Without realizing it, we can harden into the miserable people described in 4:16–17, who can’t rest unless they’ve done wrong or hurt someone. No one starts out like that. But the path of evil is like a conveyor belt that pulls you deeper into the darkness, until you don’t know why you’re stumbling, and can’t back out (19). That’s terrifying.

In his grace, Jesus Christ offers you a better way: “But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, which shines brighter and brighter until the noonday (4:18).” That glorious promise is my favorite verse in Proverbs, and it could be your life, starting today. It just takes one step.



22. GUARD THE SOURCE

In an ancient city, the water source was everything; the people depended on it to live. If that central spring got stopped up, polluted, or poisoned, it was no minor inconvenience—everyone died! Naturally, the people learned to guard that water source. They might build a wall around it, post sentries by it, or run regular tests on it. Why such vigilance? Because everything depended on what flowed out of that source.

That bright path of life we learned about yesterday sounded wonderful, didn't it? But how can we make sure that we stay on that path, through every season of our lives? The secret is in 4:23: "Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life." You must protect your heart. We tend to focus on our outer appearance, but God says your heart is what drives your life (see 1 Sam 16:7). Your heart is the headwaters of your life, flowing out through many streams to your thoughts, words and actions. What your heart loves will determine everything else about you.

As a young king, Solomon "loved Yahweh," and it made him great (1 Kings 3:3). But he didn't keep his heart. Over time, it drifted, until as an old king, Solomon loved his pagan wives, riches, power, status, even literal idols (1 Kings 11:1–8). Solomon's false loves poisoned the springs of his life, and he tragically lost his kingdom (1 Kings 11:9–43). As a pastor, I've seen this sad story play out over and over, among Christian people who love the Lord and mean well, but don't tend their hearts.

Gradually, subtly, their hearts drift to other things, until they veer off wisdom's path. So how *do* we guard our hearts?

Watch your ears (24). What are you listening to consistently? If you binge on worldly entertainment without running it through a biblical filter, those ungodly values will shape you. If your coworkers run down their spouses all day, you will begin to devalue your own marriage. If you consume the news 24/7, never coming up for air to remember that God is sovereign, then you'll be fearful and angry. If you hang out with people whose speech is self-absorbed, griping, or consumed with money, that will have an impact on you. What comes through your ears will shape your heart.

Watch your eyes (25). What am I looking at consistently? Gazing at pornographic or borderline raunchy images does something to my heart. So does gawking with envy at other peoples' lives on social media. Looking endlessly at all the things that I don't have on Amazon, Pinterest, and Zillow is sure to shape a discontented heart. If I obsessively watch sports or check my financial portfolio, but I never find time to get my eyes on a Bible, this will determine what I do and do not love.

Watch your feet (26–27). Where do I consistently go and *stay*? *Where* you spend your time, *who* you spend it with, and *what* you spend it doing is going to direct your heart. Is logging all those hours in those places, doing those activities, with those people...inclining your heart to love Christ and his wisdom? Or when my feet go where they go, do I tend to forget about Jesus? Am I embarrassed by his wisdom when I go there? Some places my feet don't need to stay long; some they don't need to go at all.

If I'm careless with my eyes, ears, and feet, I won't keep wisdom in my heart. I will gradually begin to love all of the wrong things. So what are you doing to keep your heart? What needs to change?



23. THE PULL WISDOM UNDERSTANDS

I recently passed several billboards featuring Smoky the Bear, reminding me to practice fire safety outdoors. Why? Fire is powerful. It is so good, so useful, so enjoyable when harnessed. But when uncontrolled, it is dangerous and destructive.

That is how this father talks to his son about sex. He is neither afraid of it, nor embarrassed by it. Sex is a good and powerful gift from a loving God. If we let God teach us about its purpose and context, we can enjoy it to the fullest. It can be one of the very best parts of your life. On the other hand, if you think *you* know better about sex than its author. If you don't respect God's design, but listen to the world, then sexual foolishness will burn your life down. So how will you walk through this world—with sexual wisdom or sexual foolishness? The stakes are high.

“My son, be attentive to my wisdom; incline your ear to my understanding (1).” There are some things that you need to understand about sex that the world does not. First, God created sex. Smart human beings did not shock God by coming up with it. No, sex is God's idea, and so are those strong sexual desires and interests that he put within you. That's nothing to be ashamed of. God designed sexual intimacy as a gift to create oneness, fulfillment, and joy in your marriage. He means it to be a beautiful and holy expression of love, commitment, and honor. That kind of sex glorifies God.

But sex is so powerful that it can be dangerous. Electricity is an incredibly useful blessing when you understand it and use it safely. But if you don't respect it, it will kill you. That's why we don't turn pre-schoolers loose in the powerhouse of the TVA Dam. But this is just how our world that you live in treats sex. They know it is exciting and fun—that is clear from the conversation, entertainment, and advertising all around you. But because the world won't listen to its Creator about sex, they don't know what they're dealing with, and keep inflicting massive damage on themselves and others. People all around you are wandering off the path of life to death and don't know it (6).

So let God teach you sexual *discernment*. Learn to identify the real and life-giving from the counterfeit and life-taking. On the road of life, strong sexual desires will pull you toward places God marks “forbidden (3).” That includes any situation in which we try to gain the pleasures of sex outside of God's design for sex. This father specifically warns his son about adultery (sex with someone else's spouse), but the Bible elsewhere forbids fornication (sex outside marriage), same-sex activity, and pornography.

You will not find sexual temptation to be strong because you are deviant, but because it is tapping into strong, God-given desires. Temptation *presents itself* as honey: sweet, delicious, satisfying. The encounter in 5:3 *looks and sounds* good. It is so thrilling to feel noticed and wanted that we will want to forget all the biblical wisdom we have ever gained in that moment. But “in the end,” the reality not sweet. It is “*bitter as wormwood, sharp as a two-edged sword. Her feet go down to death.*” Instead of honey, you are left only with sharp, bitter consequences. If that's where you are today, Jesus is eager to meet you with ample, cleansing grace. But he also wants to arm us with wisdom for the road that remains ahead.



24. THE PAIN WISDOM AVOIDS

An enormous sign stands on the rocky shore beside Pickwick Dam, overlooking the waters where I have played all my life. In huge, red, block letters, the sign proclaims: “WARNING: DANGEROUS WATERS.” I take it seriously. Many people have lost their lives by getting too close to the dam’s churning waters through the years. I always turn back when I get to that sign, so I get to keep enjoying the lake. The father’s words today should have the same impact on us. When we know how strongly we are pulled toward sexual foolishness, and how deadly are the consequences, we take it seriously.

The father tells his son to “keep your way far” from forbidden sexual situations, and “do not go near it (7–8).” Don’t think you can enjoy the thrill of the temptation and remain in control. You can’t. So don’t make that flirtatious remark to someone else’s spouse. Don’t wander around aimlessly online when no one is around. Don’t send that suggestive message to that off-limits person. Don’t allow an emotional bond to form with someone when you have made a covenant with another. Stop going to those places, attending those events, and hanging out with those people that make sin feel attractive. Be willing to take whatever inconvenient, costly, and painful steps are necessary to pursue purity in God’s sight (Matt 5:27–30). The truth is, no sacrifice you make to prioritize sexual holiness can compare to the brokenness described in 5:9–14.

These verses can be hard to read, especially if your own sexual failures

have cost you dearly. The purpose here is not to crush you with shame, but to drive you to a merciful Savior. He both forgives your sins and forearms you with wisdom for the rest of your journey. These blunt words tell us what to expect when we misuse God's powerful gift of sex, because no one is thinking about this when the satisfaction is offered (5:3).

Sexual sin will take your honor (5:9a). There is an honorable way to control your body and to enjoy sex, as we will see tomorrow (cf Heb 13:4; 1 Thes 4:4). But sexual recklessness dishonors yourself and the people who God calls you to honor by your respect, fidelity and self-restraint. Your reputation and conscience will bear the marks.

Sexual sin will also rob your relationships (5:9b). The "private" sexual choices we make never just impact ourselves. We can make merciless enemies, squander years of trust and ruin precious relationships, create tension in a family and isolate ourselves. Sexual sin will steal your strength (10). God gave you strength and vitality so that you could pour yourself into focused, fruitful, soul-satisfying and God-glorifying labor. But sexual sin always saps your energy and divides your attention. You're spending all your time managing your sin—either concealing it on the front end, or doing damage-control after the fact. The verse also acknowledges the financial price your sin will exact.

Finally, sexual sin will crush your pride (11–14). The final verses paint a haunting portrait of bitter regret at the end of life. We need to understand that sexual sin is *not* unpardonable, but it does leave unique scars (1 Cor 6:18). A wise person reckons with this before the fact. Yet there is also hope in this tragic picture. This broken fool has reached "the end" of himself (11; Luke 15:17–20). Jesus can work with that! He *loves* to work with that! After listing every kind of sexual sinner, Paul reminds the Corinthian church, "And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God (1 Cor 6:11)." Even if you have blown past every warning sign, you can come to him today!



25. THE PLEASURE WISDOM OFFERS

Martin Luther was right. “Whoever is ashamed of marriage, is ashamed to be human and creates the impression that one can do a better job than the way God created it. ... It’s the god of the world, the Devil, therefore, who has demeaned marriage and made it into a sham.” Don’t let the intense warnings about sexual sin these past few days give you the idea that God hates sex. I’m afraid the church has sometimes perpetuated this notion, but nothing could be further from the truth! The *devil* tells you that God is out to restrict your pleasure (see 1 Tim 4:1–15). One pastor put it like this: sex is not so bad that it must be avoided; it is so good that it must be protected, by marriage.

God has warned us about the world’s counterfeit sexual pleasures because he wants us to enjoy the real thing: “*Drink water from your own cistern, flowing water from your own well* (15).” God understands that thirst in your soul for sexual intimacy—he put it there! Not in order to deny and suppress it, but so that you could satisfy that thirst in the right way. An exclusive, loving, committed marriage is the context for maximum enjoyment of God’s gift. That’s what the father tells his son in these exuberant verses.

It is sacred (15–17). A husband and wife can say to one another: “*All of me is for all of you, and for you alone, forever. What we share is too intimate and holy to give to a stranger.*” God created sex to be physically enjoyable, as 5:18–20 make clear. But sex is also more. In a marriage, God is creating

a unique relationship that he calls a “one-flesh union (Gen 2:18–25).” Two separate individuals die away, and one new person is raised up in their place. Sexual intimacy is the physical expression of this union that God alone can form. It involves a total vulnerability and self-giving that, when protected by a marriage covenant, is beautiful. Under that covenant, a husband and wife can give themselves freely, without fear of comparison, competition, or rejection. That is a precious gift! This is why godly sex in marriage strengthens the relationship, and why sex outside marriage leaves you feeling so hurt, cheated, and betrayed.

It is satisfying (18-20). There is nothing restrictive here! One of God’s designs for sex in marriage is procreation and godly offspring (Gen 1:28; Mal 2:15). But the goal of sex in these verses is the enthusiastic delight that this son and his wife can know as they submit to God’s way of sexuality. It is clear from this description that they are *attractive* to one another. They *rejoice* in one another. They are even *intoxicated* in one another. All of this is mutual. There is nothing demanding, demeaning, or destructive. Godly sex is all about serving, giving, and honoring. Further, the words “at all times” and “always” (19) indicate that sex is an important and ongoing aspect of the marriage relationship. A whole book of the Bible, Song of Solomon, celebrates the joy of the sexual union. Paul warns Christian spouses not to remain apart from one another for lengthy periods, because it reinforces your union and guards you against temptation (1 Cor 7:1–5).

It is safe (21-23). Unlike those forbidden sexual outlets, there is nothing sneaky or sleazy about sex within the marriage union. It is *clean*: “Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled... (Heb 13:4)” Consequently, there is nothing bitter or sharp on the other side (5:4), only a lifetime to enjoy more deeply the blessing of God without fear. So in the end, we are reminded that all a man’s ways are before the eyes of the Lord (21). We can submit to his Lordship and rejoice in his gifts, or we can ignore his wisdom and be entangled in our own folly (22–23). What’ll it be?



26. COMMITMENTS TO AVOID

My family once spent three weeks visiting several national parks out west. We had a wonderful trip, and hiked probably 100 miles over all sorts of trails without any incident. Then, the day after we got home, I stepped on a 6-inch rusty decking nail, like a scene from *Home Alone*. As I writhed on the ground in pain, I pondered the irony. After passing safely through all that dramatic, Rocky Mountain terrain, I wasn't expecting an incident walking around in my grandparents' backyard. But whether I was looking for it or not, the nail still got me, and I still had to go get a tetanus shot.

Proverbs 6:1–19 is like that. The pitfalls the father points out here are not of the flashing, neon-sign variety. None are as notorious as sexual immorality, which he just addressed. Your heart does not have to be in high rebellion against God to stumble into trouble with loans, laziness, or liars, but it takes more than good intentions to make it on the road of life. That is why we need these warnings. First, see that there are commitments you need to avoid (6:1–5).

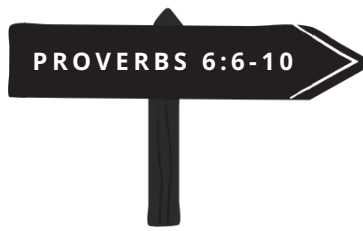
The father offers his son a hypothetical scenario. “Imagine that a friend asks you to co-sign for him on a loan. He really needs the money, and the bank won't do the deal unless you vouch for him.” “I guess I would do it,” the son says. “He's my friend. I ought to help him. No big deal.” But to the son's surprise, the dad says, “Stop right there. That's one of the worst decisions you could ever make!” Why?

Co-signing, or “putting up security,” is far more serious than just

privately loaning someone a little cash. Think about it. Banks are in business to lend money, yet they have turned your friend down because they determined he is too big a risk. He has apparently been irresponsible or untrustworthy in the past; they know if they lend *him* money, they'll never get it back. So in a co-sign, *you* take full responsibility for *his* loan. *You* carry all the risk, instead of the bank. And if the loan comes due and your friend doesn't pay up (as the bank expects), they will come after you. They will demand the money and any late fees that have accrued. They can even garnish your wages or sue you to recover the funds. This whole time, you have personally been working hard, saving up, trying to do the right thing. But because you tied your future to this guy, *his* foolish choices throw *you* and your family into crisis. You've lost control of your own life.

The Bible advises you to give generously, but not to enter a binding financial contract like this. Even if the friend pays back the loan as promised, it will strain your relationship horribly until he does. So feel the urgency in 6:3–5! Don't be pressured or manipulated into this kind of commitment. If you already have, don't sleep until you get out of it. Beg on your knees to be released. That's embarrassing, but it's not as bad as your family losing everything. Run from this like a gazelle being chased by a lion.

The broader point is that godly people can make unwise financial commitments that wind up controlling their lives. Don't run up credit card bills you can't pay each month. Don't take out loans that require a miracle to pay back. Don't spend beyond what you make to try to "keep up" with everyone else. Financial stress will rob your peace, strain your marriage, and hinder you from being all that God has called you to be. Life is hard enough without "coming into the hand of your neighbor;" you want to live in the Lord's hands only.



27. THE SLUGGARD AND THE ANT

“What kind of animal does the word ‘ sluggard’ make you think of?” I asked the children. “A SLUG!” they all shouted. Exactly. The “sluggard” may be a very nice guy, but he drags around through life, putting out minimal effort. If godly people can make life hard by foolish commitments (6:1–5), they can do the same thing by sheer laziness.

Proverbs tell us a lot about the sluggard. He is lazy, wallowing in his bed as opportunity passes him by: “As a door turns on its hinges, so does a sluggard on his bed (26:14).” He is careless, neglecting his present responsibilities and then suffering for it later: “The sluggard does not plow in autumn; he will seek harvest and have nothing (20:4).” He wants plenty of things, but is not willing to work for any of them: “The desire of the sluggard kills him, for his hand refuses to labor (21:25).” He starts many tasks, but sees none of them through to completion: “Whoever is slothful will not roast his own game (12:27).” When someone calls him on it, he is always ready with excuses: “The sluggard says ‘there is a lion outside! I shall be killed in the streets!’” (22:13) He is a continual frustration to his parents, employer, and anyone else who depends on him: “Like vinegar to the teeth or smoke to the eyes, so is the sluggard to those who send him (10:26).” His laziness is obvious to all, but he’s sure he has it all figured out (24:30).

The sluggard’s most basic problem is he is out of touch with reality: in God’s world, laziness does not work out. So the father urges his son to

regain perspective by observing an ant hill. This tiny creature has a lot of wisdom to teach him.

Planning. It's summer now, with plenty of food. But winter is coming (like it does every year!). Food will be scarce. If I want to eat *then*, I should work *now*. Wisdom looks beyond my immediate desires to future needs and goals. In other words, if I have a test next Friday, I shouldn't binge-watch Netflix until Thursday night.

Personal responsibility. An ant has no supervisor standing over her, barking orders. No mama has to hover over the ant, babying and bribing him to do his work, checking behind to make sure it got done. An ant is internally motivated. He embraces God's design: if he is going to survive, he must work, and no one else can do it for him.

Persistence. Day after day under the summer sun, the ant does work that will not benefit him until much later in the year. The ant does not need an instant reward to keep doing what he should; he understands the principle of "delayed gratification." Plodding away at today's task will pay off in my life down the road.

Pleasure. The ant may have denied himself some leisure-time when he was laboring out in the heat, but it's all worth it when winter hits. Now he enjoys the fruit of his work. There's nothing like this feeling at the end of a job well done.

So the dad exhorts the sluggard: How long will you lie there, wasting the one precious life God gave you? Life is made of incremental choices. Opting for "a little slumber" when you should be working seems like no big deal at the time. But those tiny, in-the-moment decisions are forming your character, until the day life catches up to you like a violent thug. Whatever task God has assigned you, do it with all your might (Eccl 9:10)!



28. TOXIC CHARACTERS

They called him a “clubhouse cancer,” and I knew just what they meant. He was a talented player, but his negative attitude and behavior behind the scenes spread to the whole team. No matter what his contributions on the field, no team can afford to keep him around. This is not just a problem in a professional baseball organization.

As you travel the road of life, you will encounter all sorts of different people, at your school, in your workplace, at your church, and out in your community. To live skillfully, you must learn to evaluate all of these fellow travelers. I don’t mean assessing their appearance or personality, but discerning their *character*. Character discernment is a critical life skill, because, sad to say, some folks are just bad news. They live to make trouble, and if you don’t wise up, their negative influence will spread to your own life.

The father describes this type of person here in the strongest possible language: wicked and worthless (11). The Hebrew word for that latter term is “Belial,” which the Bible elsewhere applies to Satan (2 Cor 6:15). Some people around you have devilish intentions, and no good will come from associating with them. They are “toxic.” If this son is going to escape their poisonous influence, he must identify and avoid them.

That may sound a bit judgmental to us, but naiveté is not a fruit of the Spirit. You can’t live with wisdom if you are taken in by appearances and can’t assess character. Before you entrust yourself to someone, you should observe their behavior and listen to their speech: “Even a child is

known by his deeds, by whether his conduct is pure and right (Prov 20:11).” Jesus himself told his disciples, “Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of men...” (Matt 10:16–17). We should not write people off as beyond redemption or incapable of change—that is ungodly judgmentalism (Matt 7:1). But if we see someone’s present behavior is toxic, we should trust them to God and hope the best for them—then politely keep our distance and refuse to be their pawn.

What are some identifying marks of the characters you want to avoid? First, they “go about (12).” Instead of quietly taking care of business, it’s like they can’t rest until they have stirred up trouble and drama. They often accomplish this through “crooked speech (12).” You can’t accept the words of a toxic person at face value, because they always have a self-serving agenda. They are sneaky, dishonest, manipulative. These crooked words come from a “perverted heart (14),” bent on promoting self, devising evil, and hurting others. This often manifests itself in “sowing discord.” With a strategic comment or social media post here, a whispered concern or confidential complaint there, they separate friends, undermine leaders, split churches, disrupt communities.

Toxic people often seem skillful, powerful, and in-control when pulling all these strings. But it never ends well for them. “Calamity will come upon him suddenly, and in a moment he will be broken beyond healing (15).” Here’s a harsh truth: God himself makes sure that toxic people always go down, because he hates them and their demonic agenda. The list of “things God hates” in 6:16–19 is worth reviewing. Marvelously, God charged his own Beloved Son at the cross with all of these hateful crimes, so that we can be completely forgiven. In the power of Christ’s resurrection, we want to get as far from this list as we can, in our associations and in our own lives.



29. HUNTED

My deer-hunting friends will tell you that all it takes to bag that prize buck is to find the right *lie*. You might promise him a filling meal by planting a nice food plot, or bang a couple of antlers together to offer him a fight with a rival. Sprinkle a little doe urine to make him think a mate is around the corner. Find the right lie, and then just wait.

The Proverbs dad does not return to the topic of sexual sin today out of a morbid obsession. He's looking at his beloved, 16-year-old son, with a future so bright. This father wants for him that joyful, God-glorifying sexual fulfillment in marriage, described in chapter 5. But his son is entering a world filled with sexual lies; he will be hunted. Sexual temptation will be so pervasive, so accessible, so alluring. It is so easy for a well-meaning believer to be seduced. He loves his son too much not to prepare him.

"My son, keep your father's commandment, and forsake not your mother's teaching. Bind them on your heart always; tie them around your neck (20)."

Making it through our sexually broken world safe and happy starts here, in a deep, personal commitment to the Lord and his Word. Mom and dad can't make this commitment for you. Your pastor can't. No one can. *You* must decide that God is good, wise, loving. You must settle that his Word is true, relevant, and life-giving. You must believe that *you* desperately need it in every season, because you are so prone to wander. You must make it your ambition to know him, to trust him, to stay close to him, to obey him. Have you done this?

Why begin a warning about sexual temptation with a call to love the Bible? Because Christians who are actively binding God's truth on their hearts don't usually blow up their lives with sexual sin. We wander off into explosive stupidity only *after* we've devalued the Word in our lives. The pattern is familiar. First, we get busy and distracted with various cares of this world. Then, we put the pursuit of God's wisdom on the back-burner of our lives. We think that we don't need weekly worship or regular Bible intake. We get careless about personal holiness. Meanwhile, the world is constantly, subtly shaping our minds and hearts. Now, when it comes time to make a decision, we're not thinking like believers at all (see Rom 12:1–2). Is it any surprise that we choose sin?

That's why the father's first exhortation is to keep God's wisdom the burning priority of your life. "Treasure up my commandments (7:1)." "Keep it like the apple of your eye (7:2)." "Bind it on your fingers, write it on the tablet of your heart (7:3)." "Make it your intimate friend (7:4)." What happens when we prioritize walking with God and knowing his Word? Over time, God's wisdom gets down inside you. Wherever you go, no matter the danger, God's wisdom will be with you, guarding your life just as 6:22–23 describe. Wisdom will lead you like a trusted guide, keep watch over when you lie down at night, advise you like an intimate friend as soon as you wake up, inform how you think about everything, light your path as a lantern down the darkest, scariest passages you are called to walk. I can't imagine a better gift than that!

But this will not happen automatically in your life. Like the old hymn says, it takes *time* to be holy. If you want wisdom to accompany you through life, start putting down roots in the Word today. Will you?



30. A GRAPHIC WARNING

Whenever the whole school was called in for an “assembly,” I knew we were in for a serious warning. A speaker would be making a graphic presentation about some destructive youthful behavior, often with a vivid, visual aid. The crashed car of a drunk-driving incident might be hauled into the gym, or a model of a smoker’s lungs would be displayed. The organizers knew that we all felt bullet-proof, and wanted us to grasp that our choices carried consequences. I never remember a school assembly warning us about sexual sin, but that’s what the Proverbs dad offers his son today. He’s graphically displaying the real-life consequences of immoral sexual choices.

Why trudge through all of this unpleasant material? This father knows that an “affair” always *appears* glamorous, exciting, alluring: “*Do not desire her beauty in your heart, and do not let her capture you with her eyelashes* (25).” The keyword in this verse is “desire.” In any tragic sexual situation, long before some forbidden action was taken, an illicit desire was tolerated, coddled, and nurtured (James 1:14–15). The wise person learns not to wait to resist sin at the last second: deal with it as soon as the desire first appears. In the case of sexual sin, we’re thinking about that first moment when you notice that off-limits person and feel that interest stir. Kill the desire *then*. Don’t give it oxygen. Don’t feed it. Don’t give it space in your heart to grow—because it will. That’s what Paul means by, “make no provision for the flesh (Rom 13:14).” We tend to be entirely too passive when it comes to sexual temptation. We have to actively resist: no lingering gazes, indulging of fantasies, or forming of heart-attachments.

That all may sound excessive to you. But it won't if you are ever confronted with the steep cost of sexual sin (26). Pornography will enslave you. Prostitutes will cost you more than the fee (1 Cor 6:16). Involvement with a married person can even "*hunt down your precious life* (26)." No wonder this father uses the most graphic images to warn his son not to be careless with sexual sin (27–29). These verses remind me of the little charcoal chimney I use for outdoor grilling. Once the coals are all glowing in that metal tube, the whole chimney turns bright red. Would you dump the contents of that chimney into your lap? Of course not. But playing with sexual sin is just as stupid. It's like holding a fire close to your chest, thinking that you won't get burned.

Proverbs 6:30–35 tells us that you won't be able to manage the fire you are lighting, especially in cases of adultery. It will burn up everything you have, starting with your reputation (30–33). If I steal to feed my family, I will still have to pay back what I stole, but people will also kind of understand it. On the other hand, if I break up another man's home by messing around with his spouse, I should not expect a lot of sympathy from my community, but "wounds and dishonor" that are not easily wiped away. The fire that I ignite with sexual sin always spreads to others, too (34–35). These verses describe the wrath and jealousy you can unleash in your life when you invade someone else's marriage covenant: you will have to deal with the other person's spouse who you wrong, your own spouse, the person you have been seeing when you try to break it off, the children and families who are involved, and more. It creates the kind of damage that you won't be able to talk or buy your way out of.

Even after we have caused the most destructive forest fire imaginable, Jesus Christ can meet us in the ashes we have left behind with forgiveness and restoration. Praise God! But Proverbs is trying to stop the damage before it starts. Are you taking God's warnings seriously in your own life?



31. DON'T WANDER OFF

After my family visited Yellowstone National Park a few years ago, I started noticing stories online about tourists who wander off the designated walkways. Warning signs are posted everywhere there, complete with lurid illustrations and horror stories about folks who tumbled into flesh-eating mudpots. Still, there will always be a few thrill-seekers who just won't listen, and end up dissolved in some geo-thermal pool. That's the kind of scary tale the father shares with his son here—he watched it unfold from his own window. One of the most important sources of wisdom, according to Proverbs, is simply observing life as it goes on around you.

The main character in this drama is “simple.” Not “stupid.” Not overtly “evil.” He just lacks experience, maturity, and God's wisdom. He follows his own instincts and feelings, never recognizing when he is wandering into danger. That's what happens when he “*passes along the street near her corner, taking the road to her house in the twilight in the evening, at the time of night and darkness (8–9).*” What is he doing *in that place, at this time*? Is he *looking* for trouble, or is he just *that* naive? Either way, his lack of discernment places himself in a very vulnerable position.

We can only describe the encounter he stumbles into as an ambush. This married woman is so forceful, and her proposition is so forward, that it seems a bit far-fetched. *This kind of thing does not happen every day*, we think. It's true that most adulterous situations develop more gradually than this. But these sudden, intense temptations are certainly

not unprecedented. More importantly, the principles we can glean from this encounter apply to all sorts of sexual temptations, including those involving a predatory man pressuring a woman, or two unmarried people, or pornography. Even if the details are very different from those in this scene, sexual temptation is always on the prowl for you. It will be attractive, aggressive, and aimed specifically at you and your weaknesses. If you say it could never be you, you're already in the same danger as this simple man. If you are not guarding yourself with God's wisdom, you can be overwhelmed by the "hour of temptation," when desire meets opportunity.

The behavior of this married woman throws every red flag in the book: she's loud and wayward, she neglects her home, deceives her husband, is a religious hypocrite, and more. This is clearly someone to avoid! But her target quit thinking about character when he saw what she was wearing. He really doesn't have *time* to think, because the temptation falls on him like a tidal wave. She seizes him, kisses him, and unleashes a flood of seductive words. There's the feast she promises—prepared from her fellowship offering (14)! There's the flattery she unloads: she's been eagerly looking for him; he's the only one she wants (15). She dangles an exotic experience in her fine house, where they can take their fill of love (16–18). Her husband just left on business, so they won't get caught; the secrecy and danger increases the excitement (19–20).

Our friend thinks he's won the lottery, but in reality he has just swallowed one lie after another. He probably *will* have fun tonight, but there is no real "love" involved here. It most certainly *won't* remain a secret. But he's got linen and cinnamon on his mind now. So like an ox stepping on the conveyor belt at the slaughter house, he follows her into the night. This father knows that an army of victims has lived out this story, so he returns his son's attention to keeping his heart (7:25). Above all else, he's got to keep his heart close to the Lord and grounded in the truth. Don't let it turn you from the path.



32. MENTORED BY WISDOM

The man's restaurant was failing. His relationships were in shambles. He was trying to overcome an alcohol addiction. Then celebrity chef Gordon Ramsay showed up in his life. By the end of the episode, the man had not only turned his business around, but had reconciled with his estranged family members, and was on the road to sobriety. Perhaps the total-life turnaround in thirty minutes is a bit unrealistic, but having the right mentor *can* make a dramatic difference in your life. That's what the father in Proverbs tells his son today.

After dealing with a series of specific dangers with his son, the father now says, "I wish I could rehearse every life scenario that you will face, but I can't. I've walked with you as far as I can, and now I want to hand you off to Someone who can go the distance. I chose this mentor for myself years ago, and she has made all the difference in my life. I'm hoping that you will let her mentor you, too." Proverbs calls this mentor "Lady Wisdom." We're talking about a daily, lifelong relationship with God and his Word. Wisdom already offered herself as this young man's mentor in chapter 1. Now, she urges him again to come under her guidance. But the window of opportunity is closing.

First, she says "I'm *available* (1-5)." Wisdom accepts anyone into her program. She's following you, calling out to you, whatever your story. You may be young and naive. You may have already been foolish and stubborn, and are now full of regret. All of that can begin to change *now*. If at this moment you simply see that you need God's Wisdom, you can start walking with her *today*. Nothing is stopping you but *you*.

Second, she says “I’m *reliable* (6–9).” We have seen that our world is full of deceptions. If you rely on your own understanding on the road of life, you *will* get hurt. You will trust the wrong people, set the wrong priorities, form the wrong habits, and invest in the wrong pursuits. Life will leave you embarrassed, beaten up, and cheated. On the other hand, Wisdom can lead you into a noble life: excellent, uncommon, elevated (6). How? In a world of lies, Wisdom will always tell you the truth. Wisdom will ground you in reality, pointing past misleading appearances to how things really are in God’s world, showing you how today’s choices will turn out for you tomorrow. The only problem? You often will not like what Wisdom says, or the way that she says it. Wisdom’s words have an edge. She can offend us. But Wisdom won’t apologize, because she is not here to flatter you, coddle you, or accept your excuses. Wisdom is here to get you out of the mess that you created when you listened to your heart instead of to God’s Word. So Wisdom may tell you that you are annoying, or lazy, or need new friends. She will tell you that you are your own biggest problem. Can you deal with that? Or will you find someone who will tell you just what you want to hear?

Finally, Wisdom says “I’m *desirable* (10–11).” She says “You want many different things: money, a better house, popularity, honor. I offer something better: God’s perspective on life.” Think about that: you know rich people who are a relational wreck. You know skinny, good-looking people who have set their lives on fire. You know Christian people who are always embroiled in drama. You know people with every earthly reason to be happy, who are totally miserable. Why? They lack wisdom. But as Solomon learned, when you make God’s wisdom your priority, you get everything else thrown in, too (1 Kings 3:10–14). Do you desire wisdom? That’s where it all begins.



33. NOTHING COMPARES

It was one of the most popular praise choruses when I was growing up in church:

Lord, you are more precious than silver

Lord, you are more costly than gold

Lord, you are more beautiful than diamonds

And nothing I desire compares with you.

I must have sung that a hundred times as a child and as a teenager, never knowing where the songwriters had drawn the lyrics. The words come from two passages in Proverbs: 3:13–15, and 8:10–11, which we read yesterday. The chorus is applying the words to Jesus himself, which is certainly appropriate. But it's also worth noting that Proverbs specifies that God's wisdom is the greatest gift we could desire. Why?

Wisdom gives you skill (12). Here's what I hope you are learning in Proverbs: I can love God, have good intentions, yet wreck my life by lacking wisdom in small, daily choices. But Wisdom makes you skillful in life. It gives you prudence, so you can identify dangerous situations before you rush in and get hurt. And knowledge, so you will understand the true nature of a situation instead of just following the crowd, your feelings, or your best guess. Wisdom teaches discretion, so you can see subtle but crucial differences between options. When my younger brother worked in the coffee industry, he learned to detect the slightest "flavor notes" in a particular coffee roast that my untrained palate never could. That's discretion: the ability to sift through the

finest distinctions of the various alternatives before you, and to make the best choice.

Wisdom gives you standards (13). The world offers its own brand wisdom. It teaches you how to get your way by lying, manipulating, cheating, bullying. Worldly wisdom seems to get results in the short-term, but in the end, God calls it “evil,” and judges it. Real wisdom recognizes that God governs this world, he has sets the rules, and he will hold us accountable. True wisdom won’t just make you smarter, but teach you to live in right relationship with God. It will align your character with his character, so that you learn to hate the evil, pride, arrogance, and perverted speech that the world offers you.

Wisdom gives you success (14–16). These verses describe how Wisdom equips kings to rule successfully. If the father speaking in Proverbs 1–9 is Solomon, then this makes perfect sense. Wisdom supplies you with counsel to make tough decisions, insight to see past appearances, strength stick by the right, hard call. When a leader has Wisdom, everything under them flourishes. You are not a king, but God has given us all responsibility over, called us all to lead/manage something. He made you to take dominion over your environment (schedule, health, family, house, job, business, ministry) for his glory (Gen 1:26–28). Wisdom helps you to do this successfully. When you “rule” faithfully over what God entrusts to you, he expands your responsibilities, all the way into the New Heavens and the New Earth.

Walking in Wisdom’s mentorship will deliver all of these gifts into your life, and more. Jesus is saying to you today: “I love those who love me.” No one has ever regretted taking his yoke upon them, and following after him. Will you sit under his wisdom today?



34. WISDOM'S QUALIFICATIONS

The bumper sticker proudly announced the driver's *alma mater*. He had not attended a major state university, an Ivy League college, or vocational school. This man had taken all his education in the "School of Hard Knocks." I admit that I have also learned plenty of lessons the hard way. Life has taught me the painful truth about procrastinating in my work, running my mouth behind someone's back, letting my emotions rule me, caring too much about what people think of me, getting touchy when someone corrected me, stubbornly refusing to admit when I have been wrong, and more.

We will all inevitably take a few courses in the School of Hard Knocks before all is said and done. But thankfully, this is not the only option available to us. Instead of figuring out life as we go, one blunder at a time, we can place ourselves under the mentorship of God's Wisdom. Today, Wisdom presents her qualifications to direct our lives.

Consider how long Wisdom has been around: "*Yahweh possessed me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old. Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the world. When there were no depths I was brought forth, when there were no springs abounding with water. Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth, before he had made the earth with its fields, or the first of the dust of the world (22–26).*" Wisdom has been around for a while! There is no situation you will run into that she has never seen before or can't help you with. It's a bit like the slogan of a certain insurance company: "We know a thing

because we've seen a thing or two." We have confidence in a business that started before World War II. How about a mentor that has been around since before *dust*?

If Wisdom's age commends her as a mentor, how about her experience (27–31)? In these poetic verses, Wisdom describes herself as God's foreman at the creation of the world. Wisdom was like a master workman at God's side as he separated light from dark and sky from land, and set boundaries for the sea. Wisdom paints a beautiful picture of the joy that she and Yahweh shared in creation, especially in making the children of man. Wisdom understands what human beings are *for*. She can share with you God's delightful, noble vision for your life, because she was there for the design.

Do these verses remind you of someone? When Solomon wrote these verses, God had not yet explicitly revealed himself as Trinity. But when Jesus appears in the New Testament, the apostles immediately connect him to this text (see especially John 1:1–18; Col 1:15–23). We're not meant to press every detail of the poetic metaphor here in Proverbs 8, where Wisdom is portrayed as female, and God almost seems to "create" Wisdom. As the Eternal Son of God, Jesus fulfills and surpasses this Old Testament picture.

In the end, the application of this profound passage is quite simple: Jesus Christ, the Wisdom of God, wants to be your personal mentor. Why not listen to him as you navigate life this week? He's eternal, and he made the world you live in. He knows perfectly how every aspect of human life is supposed to work: money, romance, speech, self-control, morality, raising kids, managing time, choosing friends, and more. Listening to Jesus gives you the *inside track* on life. He loves you, rejoices in you, and wants you to delight in God, too. But you have to get decisive (32–36). Will you?



35. THE INVITATION

The night before I left for college, I drove out to our local city park. It had served as a kind of backdrop to my whole childhood and teenage years, and I wanted to go reflect on the next day's big move. The university I was attending was only about 45 minutes from home. But even at age eighteen, I knew that I was turning a major page in my life: moving to a new place, meeting new people, entering a new stage of independence. I felt excited, nostalgic, a little anxious—maybe you have had a similar moment yourself.

In Proverbs 9, our young man finds himself at just such a transition-point. His long talk with his dad (ch 1–8) is complete. He is now reaching the end of his first day down the road of adult life. As the sun sets, he reaches a fork in the road, flanked by two hills. At the top of each hill sits a house, and at the door of each house stands a hostess. Both invite him up for a meal. These hostesses want to advise him, influencing the choices he will make on the rest of his journey. Their names are “Wisdom” and “Folly.”

Picture this young man, standing at this fork, considering these invitations. He does not realize it, but this single choice will shape the rest of his journey. Now picture yourself, in that same place. Whether you are age eighteen or eighty-eight, you must also choose whose company you will keep on the road of life that lies ahead of you.

“Wisdom has built her house; she has hewn her seven pillars (1).” The young man looks up to see a massive, elegant, seven-pillared palace. In a world

of one- or two-room houses, everyone who sees this house notices, admires, and is drawn into it. This is the kind of life God's wisdom can help you build: lovely, stable, complete, compelling. From the backyard, the young man smells the aroma of steaks on the grill. "*She has slaughtered her beasts; she has mixed her wine; she has also set her table (2).*" This kid would be used to flatbread and beans; he's never had anything like what Wisdom is serving! God's wisdom stabilizes like a house *and* satisfies like a feast: it is filling, delicious, joyous. We've sampled this already in chapters 1–8, and found help for work, friends, decisions, marriage, reputation, temptation. These are just the *hors d'oeuvres*!

The best part of this feast? It is absolutely free! "She has sent out her young women to call from the highest places in the town, '*Whoever is simple, let him turn in here!*' To him who lacks sense she says, '*Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. (3–5).*'" Wisdom's invitation is not for someone else. It's for you, just as you are. Naive and easily misled. Anxious, overwhelmed, lacking sense, tripping up, making painful mistakes you can't identify. Sad and regretful over the time you've already wasted. You are *just* who Wisdom wants. You'll get a fabulous meal and the best sleep you've ever had. You'll wake up to strong coffee and Wisdom ready to travel the rest of the way with you. And it's all been made ready for you by the grace of God, through the death of Jesus Christ in your place. You don't have to get scammed by the world's lies and learn everything the hard way. You can walk in the way of insight. You can really *live*!

You only have to know you need help, and "leave your simple ways (6). Put your life under Jesus' management. Listen to him. Let him change you. You can trust him! He will lead you into the satisfied life.



36. HOUSE OF LIES

If I had to pick a favorite restaurant, it might just be Texas de Brazil. It's a chain of Brazilian-style steakhouses that Candace and I have eaten at on several special occasion over the years. Your hostess seats you at a white table-cloth table, where a small coaster awaits: red on one side, green on the other. Once you flip your coaster to green, a stream of servers bring skewers loaded with succulent cuts of meat— steaks, pork, lamb, Brazilian sausages. They will keep slicing and serving until you finally surrender, and flip that coaster back to red. As we saw yesterday, that's the kind of treatment you get at Lady Wisdom's house (9:1–6).

But across the road, an alternative dining experience beckons. The similarities of the invitations are striking. Folly is recruiting all the same customers and using many of the same words. She makes sure that you can't miss her! She is *loud*. Folly's marketing director takes her cues from those Buc-ees gas stations, with tons of huge, colorful billboards lining the interstate. Folly's invitation is also seductive: she knows how you think and she knows what you like, like those curated advertisements that show up on your phone. Folly appeals to your pride, ambition, lust, greed, laziness, insecurity—whatever it takes to draw you in.

Folly boasts that she can help you make it on the road of life, but the truth is, she knows nothing. When Wisdom advertises a satisfying meal, you can count on her to deliver. But Folly offers nothing but a bunch of

empty promises. That's why Folly is just sitting on her front porch, not busily preparing a feast like Wisdom. She can only try to lure you with the prospect of short-term excitement and fun. "*Stolen water is sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant* (17)." Live for the moment! Make your own rules! No consequences! We can't deny the surface appeal of Folly's mottos, but it's all a pack of lies. God *has* made rules. Your actions today *will* carry consequences tomorrow. And after a little instant gratification, you'll be dealing with a lot of pain, chaos, and regret.

That's the jarring reality of 9:18. Folly will tell you absolutely anything to get you in her house. But as soon as the young man walks inside, he hears the door close and lock behind him. He looks around and notices there is no food in the kitchen, and that the place is a total dump. He turns to ask his hostess what the big idea is, and there stands Folly, with a crazy look in her eye, pointing a .357 at his head. Behind her, a shovel leans against the wall. It turns out that Folly's backyard is full of the bodies of young travelers, who took her invitation instead of Wisdom's. How can we avoid this?

Proverbs teaches that there are many ways to end up at Folly's House. You may reject the wisdom of God's Word outright. You can just be too busy to pay attention to it. Most of us end up at Folly's simply by living in a way that "seems right" to me. "There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death (14:12)." We get there by making choices based on their superficial appearance, and not reality. We wind up with Folly by doing what feels good in the moment, or seems to offer an immediate reward, not thinking about the long-term. You can find yourself at Folly's table by following the crowd or by following your feelings. Because the way of Folly is the way of the world, it will always be popular. You will have plenty of company, and the long line outside her door will reassure you that you are making the right choice. But you won't like what Folly serves up, and you can't stop those dishes by just flipping your coaster.



37. THE CHOICE

My kids won't remember everything I've tried to teach them. But I'm really hoping they hang onto the simple catechism I developed from Proverbs 9.

Question: What do you get at Wisdom's house?

Answer: A good meal and a good night's sleep.

Question: What do you get at Folly's house?

Answer: Shot in the head and buried in the backyard.

Of course, when you put it that way, the choice is obvious. No one sets out thinking, "I want to blow my life up and be totally miserable." But you don't have to consciously choose to eat with Folly to end up with her. No one *thinks* that they're choosing Folly. All you have to do is *not* choose. Just do what comes natural, and you'll end up there. On the other hand, no one gets the satisfied life Wisdom offers by accident; we have to choose to feast on God's Word. We will all eat with either Wisdom or Folly; there is no third option. As we close this study, there are three realities we must embrace.

Repentance (7–9). None of us is naturally wise; we all need God to change us in a million ways. But the fool is confident that he knows what he's doing. When God tries to bring correction into a fool's life, he rejects it. He gets offended. He explains and makes excuses. He surrounds himself with people who flatter and tell him he's right. So the fool never changes, learns, or matures. He just has a really hard life.

The satisfied life always starts with repentance. Confess that you are not wise and need God to correct everything about you. Humbly seek the instruction of his Word. Never stop learning and growing in every season. That's all you need for a wonderful life.

Reverence (10). Start acknowledging God for who he is. This is his world, he sets the terms, and nobody gets around them. I can either go with the grain or against the grain. I am not my own god, but a finite creature, made in God's image to know and worship him; he will hold me accountable for my choices. God has spoken in his Word, and I am responsible to know and obey what he has said. He has made atonement for my sins through Jesus Christ, so I can be forgiven and restored when I fail. Living for my happiness will make me miserable; living for his glory will make me happy. Get a grip on these essential truths, and life starts to make sense. Cut yourself loose from them, and life becomes dark and confusing. It all starts with the fear of the Lord.

Responsibility (11–12). Finally, if you want to blow off every bit of the precious wisdom God has tried to share with you and do this on your own, you can. But please understand that, while your life of folly *will* negatively impact other people, it will mostly hurt you. Your life will be unhappy and frustrating, and you won't understand why. You will probably whine and moan and blame everyone and everything else. But you will be no victim. It will be your responsibility. On the other hand, you can choose wisdom. That choice will bless many other people, but it will mostly bless you, with a happy, purposeful, peaceful life of becoming all God made you to be.

The road of your life is stretching out before you. You will either walk that road with Wisdom or with Folly, and no one can choose for you. What will it be?

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