



PROVERBS

SKILL IN THE ART OF LIVING

PART FOUR – “WISDOM OR FOLLY?”
By Pastor Ricky Stephen
Proverbs 2:16-19

A World Where Sex isn’t a Problem

Proverbs opens with a father passing on wisdom to his son. Wisdom for life and part of life’s wisdom is wisdom for sexuality. Roughly 25% of chapters 1–9 in Proverbs focuses on the ‘adulterous woman.’

While this seems to confirm our culture’s assessment of Christianity being repressive and reductionistic, a thought experiment might help change our perspective. What if the Christian standard for sexuality was followed? What if people not only saved sex for the context of marriage and remained faithful, but also dealt with the core issues of lust?

It’s hard to imagine a world like that wouldn’t be a better world.

I. Lust Doesn’t Have a Gender

Our first example is in Proverbs 2:16–19 where we are promised that wisdom will save us from the ‘adulterous woman’.

This isn’t a narrow gendered warning—it’s a metaphor with broader meaning. Lust, Proverbs insists, is not a male issue – it’s a human one.

In cultural practice, however, we’ve often placed the burden of lust on women. From early Jewish traditions to modern Christian purity culture, women have been treated as the ones responsible for managing male

desire. One example of this distortion is seen in John 8, where the woman is brought before Jesus for judgment without the man.

But Proverbs isn’t blaming women. Gender isn’t the important point. The word translated ‘adulterous’ in these passages is the Hebrew term meaning ‘strange.’ It refers to the woman not being the young man’s wife, but also about her being in the community but not of it.

Adultery in Proverbs also becomes a stand-in for folly itself. Just as Lady Wisdom is personified as a woman

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calling from the city, so is folly. Two tables are set. Two invitations are offered. Which will we accept?

In our own evangelical subculture, there has been a history of gendering our discussion on lust. Women are taught to see their bodies as hazardous substances ‘causing their brother to stumble;’ and men are taught they are hypersexual animals who need marriage to solve their lust problems.

Jesus offers a different perspective:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” Matthew 5:27-28

The responsibility for lust is on the luster. Jesus is speaking to men, maybe to correct their gendered approaches; but it's clear, Jesus calls us all to deal with the plank in our own eye rather than the speck in others' eyes.

Lust is not just an issue of male self-control or female modesty. Men need modesty and women need self-control. Lust is a human issue.

II. Sex in its Proper Place

Proverbs 5:15-23 develops a positive view on sex. It describes a well of water as an image for the young man's wife—future or current. The point is not sex, but relationship as a source of refreshment and intimacy.

Sex is a good gift given by God to strengthen and deepen committed relationships. Proverbs tells us to enjoy the spouse of our youth. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 7, encourages married couples not to withhold sex, to protect each other from temptation. This isn't a call for begrudging duty. If sex is absent—apart from illness or injury—something deeper likely needs care. Loving conversations matter more than demands. Healthy sexual intimacy takes real relational effort. It's digging a deep well, not buying bottled water. In marriage, sex becomes a place of joy, trust and mutual knowing. Outside it, it's water spilled in the street.

Crucially, intimacy doesn't require sex. Jesus, our model for full humanity, lived a perfectly connected, fully alive life without sexual activity. Paul wished more people would enjoy the benefits of celibacy (1 Corinthians 7:6-8).

Some of us aren't having sex because we are single or too young for marriage. Some of us are married, but there is illness, injury or trauma making sex different than we expected. If you're married, sex is a good and necessary part of your relationship; but it may look different than you've been taught to expect by our culture. If you aren't married and having sex or your sex looks different than you expected, you're not less human or missing out on whole life flourishing.

Some churches have used extreme fear tactics around sex, giving us the sense that sexual sins are unforgivable or would ruin our future marriages.

Some of the most important figures in Christian history have complicated sexual histories and did amazing things for God. Many who live in phenomenal marriages have complicated histories too.

Peter of Damascus reminds us:

“Even if you [sin], you should not despair. It is bad enough that you have sinned; why in addition do you wrong God by regarding Him in your ignorance as powerless? Is He, who for your sake created the great universe that you behold incapable of saving your soul?”¹

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[illegible]

¹ St Peter of Damaskos, Book I: A Treasury of Divine Knowledge, The Philokalia: The Complete Text (Vol. 3)

To limit the power of God's grace to bring healing and life to this area of our lives amounts to heresy. Jesus paid it all - His grace is sufficient - Be at peace.

III. Wisdom: Disciplining Desire

At the end of Proverbs 5 at verse 23 we're told that the one who follows the stranger "...dies for lack of discipline" (ESV). Sexual self-control is a necessary skill in the art of living.

Proverbs gives so much airtime to adultery in the introduction to use it as a master metaphor for folly in general. Paul Koptak writes:

"Adultery is not only a sin that exacts payment, it is the ultimate symbol of the fool's pathway."²

Proverbs Chapter 9 helps us read the rest of Chapters 1-8 through a different lens. It presents wisdom as a woman making an invitation and folly as a woman making an invitation. Which seems to insinuate that everything said about adultery in general relates to foolishness in principle. The opposite, then, would be wisdom.

The 'stranger' or 'lady folly' is presented as beautiful (Proverbs 6:25), smooth talking (Proverbs 6:21), and makes an enticing offer of an incredibly pleasurable experience (Proverbs 7:17-18).

Wisdom, instead, is described in terms of value (Proverbs 8:18-21). Proverbs 31:10-31, many believe, is a return to a picture of Lady Wisdom. It ends with the statement:

"Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised."

Proverbs 31:30

A major principle arising from this allegory is the way wisdom calls us to live a life of value more than a life of pleasure.

Many of the most intense pleasures available to us—illicit drugs, promiscuous sex, deep-fried butter—feel good in the short term but over the long-haul give us diminishing returns.

Many of the things which are good for us—hard work, long term relationships, vegetables—may not give us as much pleasure in the short term but preserve pleasure in the long term. We also, over time, train our brains to

enjoy good things by restricting our experience of dangerous pleasures.

Porn's danger is not just as a tool for lust, betrayal of our sexual commitments or for its support of people's maltreatment. Those are all terrible; but porn also trains our brains for a certain type of sexuality, a dangerous and dehumanizing one. Usually, it's referred to as a drug, because more intense content is needed to get to a previous high.

We train our brains, through discipline, to love what is good; or we train our brains to rely on intense pleasures that are bad for us through lack of discipline.

IV. Stranger Danger

Proverbs 7 presents its most vivid and extended image of the seductive stranger. The father watches from the window as a young man walks toward danger. A woman meets him, and she's described in predatory language—lurking at street corners and setting a snare.

Part of our personal responsibility towards our sexuality is to protect ourselves from those who are not living discipleship to Jesus, who may want to use us.

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² Koptak, Paul. (3 Nov 2003). The NIV Application Commentary: Proverbs. Zondervan Academic, pg. 168

VI. Conclusion: Who Will You Choose?

So, we end where Proverbs ends - with a choice.

Two voices call from the city. Two tables are set. One offers momentary pleasure. The other promises enduring life. Will we choose wisdom or folly? A life of pleasure or a life of value?

For the young this is a vital crossroads. For those returning to faith it's a grace-filled reset. Proverbs doesn't just want to give you good advice. Proverbs wants to shape the kind of world we live in. Your choices shape culture.

As we tell young couples - your marriage is public art. It reflects something larger than you and can become a beam of light in the darkness.

So, what kind of world will you build?

Choose wisdom.

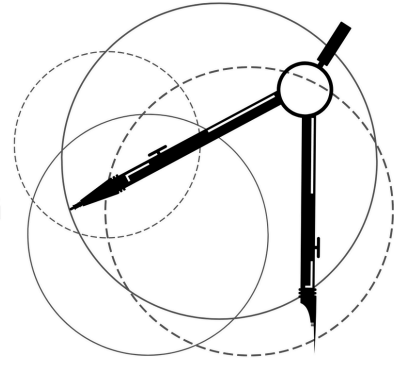
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Discussion



Reflection

- How were sexual issues presented to you growing up—either in the church or out of it? What was helpful or damaging about how it was presented?
- What are the subtle ways sexual obsession may impact you? How does the call to focus on relationship change things?
- Each of us has a private sexual life—either a history, hidden fantasies or secret struggles—the way forward is to trust the grace of Jesus and bring these things to life.
 - Who can you let into your sexual discipleship to help you move forward?
 - If you don't have anybody right now, how can you build a relationship that could get there?
- What short-term pleasures are you addicted to now, what would it look like to seek wisdom's path of value in these things?

APPENDIX: HOW TO USE PROVERBS

This summer, our hope as a church is to steep ourselves in the wisdom of Proverbs. But this book invites a different approach than most others. The Book of Proverbs isn't meant to be speed-read—it's a book to sit with, to meditate on, to 'chew the cud,' as the rabbis would say.

- Chapters 1–9 serve as the introduction. They give us the book's purpose, a guiding epigraph (1:7), and ten speeches from a father to a son about wisdom. This section works well with a 'chapter-a-day' reading rhythm.
- Chapters 10–30 contain collections of short, poetic couplets. These proverbs are often loosely connected but are mostly designed to stand alone—ideal for slow, focused meditation and memorization.

GENERAL GOALS FOR READING THE BOOK OF PROVERBS

Go Slow	Stop when something grabs your attention. Sit with it. If it takes three years to get through the book, that's perfectly fine.
Memorize Individual Proverbs	These sayings are written poetically so we can remember and apply them. Like the phrase "fail to plan and you plan to fail"—it sticks because of the way it's worded.
Read in Multiple Translations/Versions	English versions vary in how they handle the poetry. When meditating on a proverb, read it in several translations. While the King James Version isn't always clearest elsewhere, it often preserves the poetic force of Proverbs well, thanks to its translators' classical training.
Be Biased Toward Action	Proverbs are meant to be lived. The goal of meditation is obedience. If all you do this summer is live out one proverb, that's a win.

STRATEGIES FOR INTERNALIZING PROVERBS

Rewrite Proverbs in a Journal.	Use a general journal or a dedicated wisdom notebook. Rewriting helps with memorization and makes the proverb more personally accessible. You might even blend a few translations into a version that sticks best for you.
Put Them in Front of Your Eyes	Use sticky notes or other visible reminders. Place proverbs on your fridge, your desk, your mirror—anywhere you'll see them often.
Practice Lectio Divina (Sacred Reading)	<p>Read: Slowly read a chapter or section of Proverbs several times. Look for a verse that 'leaps off the page.'</p> <p>Meditate: Reflect on that proverb. What is it saying? Have you seen this truth in your life? Why might God be highlighting it now?</p> <p>Pray: Talk to God about what you're noticing. Ask for wisdom and strength to live it out.</p> <p>Contemplate: Spend a few quiet moments in God's presence, letting the proverb stick to your soul.</p>