

Fool Proof: A Study in Proverbs

Week 7 | Sexual Sin

This week we're going to be discussing a challenging topic that Proverbs directly addresses — sexual sin. See what Bruce has to say about it in the video below:

<https://vimeo.com/575781405>

Ask yourself

- Did you pray along with Bruce? Take a little more time to pray and add your own thoughts and feelings.
- Bruce suggested that you read through [Proverbs 5-7](#) and list the commands and warnings that you find in these chapters. Then look for the rationales — why does God command what he does?
- Scan through Proverbs 5–7 again and notice the images the author uses.

Pray

Almighty God, Creator, Redeemer, Restorer,

We come to you as your people, surrounded by the devastation brought by sexual sin. We see those who have been hurt and victimized by sexual abuse. May we offer them your love, comfort, and justice.

By the power of your Spirit, help us live with sexual integrity. Correct our faulty vision and heal our broken and twisted places. Show us how to be a light to the world by honoring your design for sex. As a faith community, may we steward our sexuality well, and offer your grace to those among us and beyond us who are struggling.

It's because of Jesus that we are forgiven and free. It's in his holy name we pray, Amen.

Talk about it

The Book of Proverbs was meant to be discussed. The sages of Israel knew that wisdom is often discovered in community. Think through the “talk about it” questions on your own and then discuss them with someone and see what you can learn together.

- Discuss some of the ways people struggle with sexuality in our current culture? Without naming names or giving specifics, what fall out have you seen from sexual sin in people's lives?
- What are some of the common questions or concerns that people in our culture have about the Bible's teaching on sex? Why do you think so much of the Bible's teaching is either ignored or justified, sometimes even among Christians?

Day 2

God created sex as a beautiful gift, but when sex is used in ways that fall outside of God's design, the consequences can be devastating. We probably all know someone who ended up with a broken heart, broken marriage, or even a broken life because of sexual sin. This sad reality is true today just as it was thousands of years ago when the book of Proverbs was written. So, in teaching people how to live wisely, Proverbs has a lot to say about sex.

In week 1 we discussed why and to whom Proverbs was originally written, and we should return to those ideas. A lot of scholars believe that this collection of proverbs was originally used to train young men. Of course, the wisdom contained in this book applies to everyone, but there are parts of Proverbs where you notice the focus on sons. This week, we're going to take a look at three speeches that the wise Father gives to his teenage or young adult son, and avoiding sexual sin is a big topic.

Knowing this ancient context helps us answer a more modern concern. Sometimes women, particularly women who've been sexually victimized or abused, find these passages difficult because they only address a female aggressor and don't instruct young men in valuing, protecting, and respecting women. To speak to this concern, we have to look at the context.

According to Old Testament scholar Tremper Longman, the son being addressed has already been well-taught. He knows how he should treat women and is being encouraged to *hold* to the instruction of his Father and Mother and *stay* on the right path.

Longman goes on, "It is our contention that this explains why the son is warned against a predator female rather than being admonished to not be predatory himself. Indeed, based on modern statistics—and we have every reason to assume ancient ones as well—it is more likely that a male would attempt to seduce a woman than vice versa. In this regard, Proverbs has been painted as a piece of sexist literature, but such a judgment does not take into account the status of the young man."¹

Proverbs is not painting all women as seducers, but it certainly warns against those who are. The speeches we're looking at this week can just as easily be applied to predatory men as to wayward women. All of us, young and old, men and women should receive the wisdom it offers so we can cultivate sexual integrity in our lives.

¹ Tremper Longman III, [*Baker Commentary on the Old Testament: Proverbs*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 181.

With all that in mind, let's see what the wise father desperately wants his son to understand.

Read

Proverbs 5:1–10

My son, pay attention to my wisdom,
turn your ear to my words of insight,
² that you may maintain discretion
and your lips may preserve knowledge.
³ For the lips of the adulterous woman drip honey,
and her speech is smoother than oil;
⁴ but in the end she is bitter as gall,
sharp as a double-edged sword.
⁵ Her feet go down to death;
her steps lead straight to the grave.
⁶ She gives no thought to the way of life;
her paths wander aimlessly, but she does not know it.
⁷ Now then, my sons, listen to me;
do not turn aside from what I say.
⁸ Keep to a path far from her,
do not go near the door of her house,
⁹ lest you lose your honor to others
and your dignity to one who is cruel,
¹⁰ lest strangers feast on your wealth
and your toil enrich the house of another.

Ask yourself

- How is the adulterous woman's speech described? What do you think that means? How does adultery or other sexual sin often start with speech?
- Based on verse 6, how would you describe this woman?
- What is the Wise Father's instruction in verse 8? What does that mean?

Read what others say

From John Goldingay:

A married couple, who are both pastors, whom I know and love have just separated. The wife had confronted the husband about his close relationship with another woman. There had been no physical adultery, but it was a close relationship that compromised their marital relationship. The confrontation had led him to tell his wife that he had been addicted to pornography for many years. His wife now feels doubly betrayed, and the crisis has led to their giving up their joint ministry. I have some hope that the separation may not be permanent and that the relationship may find healing, but they are less hopeful than I am. I have to admit that the man's sexual activities outside his marriage threaten the death of the marriage and

the end of the ministries and of much of the promise of the lives that each of these individuals had.

Proverbs addresses just such situations—or rather, seeks to anticipate it. It knows that men get into sexual messes, and it seeks to forestall this process. One can sometimes wonder whether the church and society are excessively preoccupied by sexual sins, but actually that preoccupation reflects the huge, deep, far-reaching importance of sex to humanity. When sex goes wrong, it has profoundly disturbing and disruptive effects on personal relationships and on the family.

Proverbs analyzes the sexual politics of its society only in terms of male sexual activity; it wants men to follow their heads rather than some other part of their anatomy. In most societies it has been easier for men than for women to get away with sexual unfaithfulness. Further, one of Proverbs' functions is to train men for service in government and administration (such service brings its own opportunities for sexual dalliance). In Western culture the opportunities and the pressures are more gender-inclusive, so a woman reading Proverbs will have to reverse the way it portrays the sexual roles. It's the "alien" man who becomes the tempter.

What most translations render as "adulterous," "immoral," or "forbidden" is literally "strange" or "alien" in the Hebrew (See 5:3). This expression might have a number of backgrounds....Here's one possibility. English parlance has often referred to the person with whom a man had an adulterous relationship as "the other woman," which might be an equivalent expression to the ones Proverbs uses.

Regardless, she's a woman who longs for a new love relationship, which can bring a temptation to a man. Maybe she has understandable reasons for that longing—maybe her own husband has been unfaithful, maybe he has thrown her out, maybe she's alone and needy... Proverbs' concern isn't to understand her story but to get its male audience not to be vulnerable to it. Typically, Proverbs doesn't focus on the fact that having an affair is wrong (though it will presuppose that this is so) but on the fact that it's really stupid. Falling for her will ruin your life.²

Pray

Sexual temptation is one of those things it can be hard to be honest about, even with ourselves. But we're got to get real, so God can redeem and restore those parts of us. You can't shock God. He knows you, and because he loves you, he wants you to bring your struggles to him. Whether you are married or single, pray about the ways you are tempted sexually.

In Proverbs 5:8, the Wise Father is clear that staying on the right path means you avoid the path that leads to temptation. This requires wisdom. Once you are honest about what tempts

² John Goldingay, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs for Everyone*, Old Testament for Everyone (Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press; Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2014), 24–26.

you, how, and when, you can learn to approach these situations with wisdom. Let the Holy Spirit guide you. Pray for his wisdom now.

Talk about it

- Discuss some of the sexual sins that people struggle with in our culture. While some things never change, the Wise Father didn't have to warn against visiting porn sites and arranging "hook-ups" on dating apps. What advice do you think he would give to young men and women today? How would it be the same? What would differ?

Day 3

In C.S. Lewis' well-known *Srewtape Letters*, a senior tempter who works for the Devil instructs a junior tempter in the best ways to lure humans into sin. He makes the point that Satan and all his demonic host could never invent a pleasure. Pleasurable things that bring joy and satisfaction could only be created by God. The Devil's trick is to entice people to use the good things of God in ways or to degrees which God has forbidden. This is certainly true of sex. God isn't against sexual pleasure. He's against sexual pleasure that is dehumanizing.

As we saw yesterday in the first part of Proverbs 5, the Wise Father warns his son to stay clear of the adulterous woman and her smooth-talking ways. In the second half of the speech, we'll see him continue this warning and encourage his son to find sexual satisfaction with his wife.

Read

Proverbs 5:11–23

- ¹¹ At the end of your life you will groan,
when your flesh and body are spent.
- ¹² You will say, "How I hated discipline!
How my heart spurned correction!
- ¹³ I would not obey my teachers
or turn my ear to my instructors.
- ¹⁴ And I was soon in serious trouble
in the assembly of God's people."
- ¹⁵ Drink water from your own cistern,
running water from your own well.
- ¹⁶ Should your springs overflow in the streets,
your streams of water in the public squares?
- ¹⁷ Let them be yours alone,
never to be shared with strangers.
- ¹⁸ May your fountain be blessed,
and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth.
- ¹⁹ A loving doe, a graceful deer—
may her breasts satisfy you always,

- may you ever be intoxicated with her love.
- ²⁰ Why, my son, be intoxicated with another man's wife?
Why embrace the bosom of a wayward woman?
- ²¹ For your ways are in full view of the LORD,
and he examines all your paths.
- ²² The evil deeds of the wicked ensnare them;
the cords of their sins hold them fast.
- ²³ For lack of discipline they will die,
led astray by their own great folly.

Ask Yourself

- According to this passage, what does the Wise Father believe will be the outcome of an adulterous affair?
- How does he encourage the son to view sex within marriage?
- Who will the son ultimately answer to if he follows the wrong path?

Read what others say

From Ray Ortlund:

The key to understanding the sexual wisdom of Proverbs is to combine both form and freedom, both structure and liberation.

Conservative people love form and restraint and control. Progressive people love freedom and openness and choices. Both see part of the truth, but wisdom sees more.

Wisdom teaches us that God gave us our sexuality both to focus our romantic joy and to unleash our romantic joy. When our desires are both focused and unleashed—both form and freedom—our sexual experience becomes wonderfully intensified. A marriage can flourish within both form and freedom, because sex is like fire. In the fireplace, it keeps us warm. Outside the fireplace, it burns the house down. This passage in Proverbs 5 is saying, “Keep the fire within the marital fireplace, and stoke that fire as hot as you can.”

From Ellen Davis:

All sexual relationships are deep. Adulterous love is deep and deadly; the strange woman and her lover are bound for Sheol, the death Pit. By contrast, “the wife of your youth” is a cistern, a well, a fountain (vv. 15, 18). The extended water imagery that represents the well-known and trusted woman is uniquely powerful; water is the most precious natural resource in semi-arid Israel, and it can never be taken for granted. As the Bible repeatedly reminds us, in a land where there is not nearly enough fresh running water, the rainwater that is stored in cisterns and replenishes deep underground wells is a sign both of God's graciousness and of Israel's continual dependence on God. Could not something similar be said of a faithful marriage? It is a sign of God's favor and a source of strength. Yet at the same time, we must remember that,

like all living things, a marriage is frail and stands in continual need of God's grace and protection, as well as of human nurture.³

From Tremper Longman:

The father addresses this concern with all the rhetorical power that he can muster because the temptation is great. An intimate relationship with a woman outside the bounds of marriage promises great pleasure and satisfaction. The truth behind the appearance, however, is that such liaisons result in tremendous pain. Thus, the father warns the son not to follow one's desires, but rather to obey the instruction. If the son does not do so, he will deeply regret the ruin that he has brought into his life.

However, the father does not stop with warning about bad behavior; he also encourages the son to proper behavior in the area of intimate relationships. Using quite provocative metaphors, the father tells the son to enjoy intimacy with his wife. In this discourse, the son is married, so we are likely to think of him as a young adult. In any case, the father encourages the idea that the best defense (against committing adultery) is a strong offense (reveling in the joys of marital sex). However, in the end, he appeals to the watching eye of Yahweh to push the son to proper behavior. Obedience is what separates the righteous from the wicked, and the wicked end up dead.⁴

Pray

Even between a loving husband and wife, sex can be an issue that causes cracks in a marriage, rather than fortifying the union. If that's the case for you, pray for your spouse. Pray that you will show them the grace and understanding that they need in this area. Then ask for wisdom on how to address the issue. Pray for open communication and that your marriage would be strengthened by your sexual relationship. Maybe it's time to bring the issue out into the open and seek help. Pray for discernment. Pray that God would bless every aspect of your marriage.

What about if you're single? Like marriage, singleness can be a gift, but not without its struggles. If you are single, then by implication, Proverbs is telling you that you should abstain from sex. That's the wise thing to do. If you're not, pray about it. If you are, but struggle with celibacy, pray over that. Regardless, ask God to help you find joy in your singleness.

Talk about it

- What are some of the reasons that sex can become a difficult issue in marriage? What about for singles? How can some of the other wisdom we've learned in Proverbs about "fear of the Lord," meaningful conversations, friendship, and anger help?

³ Ellen F. Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs*, ed. Patrick D. Miller and David L. Bartlett, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 52–53.

⁴ Tremper Longman, 157–158.

Day 4

Lisa Scheffler, author

There are parts of our culture that insist if you're not sexually fulfilled, then your life is practically meaningless. So, the reasoning goes, do what you have to do — use pornography, have casual sex, cheat on your spouse, leave your marriage if your unfulfilled — and don't worry too much about the consequences.

Today's reading is going to give us some dire warnings about what can happen if you let your sexual appetite rule your life.

Read

Proverbs 6:20–32

- ²⁰ Son, keep your father's command
and do not forsake your mother's teaching.
- ²¹ Bind them always on your heart;
fasten them around your neck.
- ²² When you walk, they will guide you;
when you sleep, they will watch over you;
when you awake, they will speak to you.
- ²³ For this command is a lamp,
this teaching is a light,
and correction and instruction
are the way to life,
- ²⁴ keeping you from your neighbor's wife,
from the smooth talk of a wayward woman.
- ²⁵ Do not lust in your heart after her beauty
or let her captivate you with her eyes.
- ²⁶ For a prostitute can be had for a loaf of bread,
but another man's wife preys on your very life.
- ²⁷ Can a man scoop fire into his lap
without his clothes being burned?
- ²⁸ Can a man walk on hot coals
without his feet being scorched?
- ²⁹ So is he who sleeps with another man's wife;
no one who touches her will go unpunished.
- ³⁰ People do not despise a thief if he steals
to satisfy his hunger when he is starving.
- ³¹ Yet if he is caught, he must pay sevenfold,
though it costs him all the wealth of his house.
- ³² But a man who commits adultery has no sense;
whoever does so destroys himself.

Ask Yourself

- Verse 27 warns against lusting in your heart after a beautiful woman. How do you define lust?
- Remember that in the ancient world, the expectation was that you would get married early in life and remarry if you were widowed or divorced. There weren't a lot of single people roaming around ancient Israel, so most illicit sex involved adultery. That's not true today when (according to a 2020 Pew study) around 30% of American adults are single. So, how do you think the Wise Father's warnings apply today?

Read what others say

From Tremper Longman:

Up to now, we have referred to the teaching in this section as that of the father, and indeed he is the one who speaks. On the other hand, it is important to point out that he represents not only his own wisdom but also that of the son's mother as well. As the mother is mentioned elsewhere (e.g., 1:8; 31:1), we point out that this is a rarity when compared with the wisdom teaching of other, related Near Eastern texts...

Verse 24 for the first time states the place from which the danger emanates: a woman called both "evil" and "foreign." We have already encountered the latter in chap. 5 (see 5:10, 20) and have determined that "foreign" is used here not in an ethnic sense, but rather with the idea that this is a woman who operates outside of customary social mores. This is what makes her evil.

The first warning has to do not with her body or the pleasures of touch, but rather with her words. She has a "flattering tongue." The way she will seduce is through her speech. This comment shows psychological insight: the sage is aware that men falter not always for the obvious reasons of beauty but also because of an appeal to self-vanity.

The next three verses provide a colorful and interesting reason for not pursuing such a woman. Indeed, it begins by dividing the "foreign" woman into two classes: the prostitute and the married woman. Illicit relationships with either will cost the son, and both are clearly wrong, but the latter will be much worse than the former in terms of consequences. A prostitute will cost money, but a relationship with another man's wife may well cost the son his life, as will be specified in vv. 34–35. The wording of v. 26b, "A married woman hunts for a man's life," is likely poetic exaggeration. She is not necessarily thinking that she will lead to his demise, but that is the practical consequence of her seduction of him.

The next two verses are memorable statements to the effect that there is no escaping the consequences of this illicit act. They comment in a humorous and memorable way that it is sheer idiocy to think that one can get away unscathed. The danger of sleeping with a woman other than one's wife is comparable to scooping hot coals in one's lap. The reference to lap is surely evocative of the man's genitals, with which he engages the wrong woman. The same

may be the case with the reference to singed feet, since feet are a well-known euphemism for genitalia in the Bible.⁵

Explore on your own

Author Rachel Welcher [gives an account](#) of a conversation she had with a young man about lust. What do you think of her advice?

Pray

Illicit sexual encounters begin with lust. Lust is more than noticing a beautiful woman or handsome man. It's a step further. Lust is deliberate. It's a desire to use or possess. It can be a form of coveting, because you want something (or in this case someone) that you have no right to.

Ultimately, lusting after someone is a way of dehumanizing them, because you've turned them from a person who bears the image of God to an object for your desire. One way to combat lust is to ask the Spirit to remind you that the person you're tempted to lust after — whether they're an image on a screen, a stranger on the street, or someone you know— is God's image-bearer and should be seen as such. They are not someone to be used. If you are currently struggling with lust, take some time to pray over it now.

Now look back at verse 23. The Wise Father tells his son that his instruction is the “way to life” and will keep him from sexual sin. In prayer, ask the Spirit to bring God's instructions quickly to mind whenever you are tempted to any sin, but particularly sexual sin. Your heavenly Father loves you and wants to keep you on the path of life. Let him.

Talk about it

- What are some ways you've learned to avoid temptation — whether to lust or something else. Discuss some things that have worked for you.

Day 5

Yesterday we saw the Wise Father using vivid imagery to warn his son against sexual sin. The image of burning coals falling in your lap is a tough one to forget! In the speech in chapter 7, he's going to make his point by telling a story.

Read

Proverbs 7:1–27

⁵ Tremper Longman, 179.

My son, keep my words
and store up my commands within you.
2 Keep my commands and you will live;
guard my teachings as the apple of your eye.
3 Bind them on your fingers;
write them on the tablet of your heart.
4 Say to wisdom, "You are my sister,"
and to insight, "You are my relative."
5 They will keep you from the adulterous woman,
from the wayward woman with her seductive words.
6 At the window of my house
I looked down through the lattice.
7 I saw among the simple,
I noticed among the young men,
a youth who had no sense.
8 He was going down the street near her corner,
walking along in the direction of her house
9 at twilight, as the day was fading,
as the dark of night set in.
10 Then out came a woman to meet him,
dressed like a prostitute and with crafty intent.
11 (She is unruly and defiant,
her feet never stay at home;
12 now in the street, now in the squares,
at every corner she lurks.)
13 She took hold of him and kissed him
and with a brazen face she said:
14 "Today I fulfilled my vows,
and I have food from my fellowship offering at home.
15 So I came out to meet you;
I looked for you and have found you!
16 I have covered my bed
with colored linens from Egypt.
17 I have perfumed my bed
with myrrh, aloes and cinnamon.
18 Come, let's drink deeply of love till morning;
let's enjoy ourselves with love!
19 My husband is not at home;
he has gone on a long journey.
20 He took his purse filled with money
and will not be home till full moon."
21 With persuasive words she led him astray;
she seduced him with her smooth talk.
22 All at once he followed her
like an ox going to the slaughter,
like a deer stepping into a noose
23 till an arrow pierces his liver,
like a bird darting into a snare,

little knowing it will cost him his life.
24 Now then, my sons, listen to me;
pay attention to what I say.
25 Do not let your heart turn to her ways
or stray into her paths.
26 Many are the victims she has brought down;
her slain are a mighty throng.
27 Her house is a highway to the grave,
leading down to the chambers of death.

Ask Yourself

- The Father has warned the son that the wayward woman would use her words to entice him. In the story he tells, he gives some examples. How does this smooth-talking woman try to lure the young man? Do you think people still use the same tactics today? How so?
- How does the Wise Father describe the young man who ends up following the woman? Why are those powerful images?

Read what others say

From John Goldingay:

How do you get people to change? Maybe it's the pastor's most far-reaching question. It's always tempting to assume that change comes about because we exhort people to change, and to operate on that basis, but a moment's reflection reminds us of the uncomfortable truth that it's not so.

Proverbs 7 implies this awareness. It has issued a series of exhortations to young men not to get involved with a married woman. Now it moves to painting a picture or telling a story, in seeking to get them to write its teaching on the tablets of their mind. It wants it always to be in front of them like something on a whiteboard, or to be inscribed into the neural patterns that shape their behavior. Once again the woman is compared with a whore, but the description that follows implies that the word is used in the loose sense. She's not someone in the sex trade but a woman who is lonely. She would settle for any lover but will give him the impression he's the only one...

Proverbs knows she's inviting him to his death. Previous chapters have implied two reasons why this is so. Adultery tends to get found out, and the woman's husband will then come after the young man; within the terms of this story, it would be wise to allow for his coming back from his business trip earlier than expected, a recurrent motif in fiction and in real life. Lying behind this reason is the fact that the very nature of the universe's moral order means that wrongdoing tends to get its reward.⁶

⁶ John Goldingay, 32–33.

From Ellen Davis:

The woman's speech (v. 14–20) is framed on either side by the teacher's instruction. The frame serves to connect this vignette with several of the sages' recurrent themes.

- First and most importantly, in light of the continual emphasis on the need to discern between wise and foolish speaking, there is an implied competition between the teacher's "words" (vv. 1, 24) and those of the "strange woman" (v. 5). Life for the sages is a marketplace of discourse, where many persuasive speakers compete for our attention and allegiance. If you want to "buy wisdom" (4:7), then you must learn to turn a deaf ear to much else that is hawked on the streets.
- Second, the narrative lends vividness to the time-worn phrase, "the way of the wicked" (Prov. 4:19; see also Psalm 1:6). It suddenly becomes real in our imaginations through the description of the woman's house as "the way to Sheol" (v. 27); her basement has a trap door to the Underworld!
- Third, the image of the house with the absent man as a place for infidelity and disaster inverts the traditional Israelite ideal of the "father's house" as the center of social and economic stability (see the comment at Prov. 2:16–22).

The perspective of the book is not biased against women, as shown clearly in the feminine representations of wisdom. On the contrary, the corrective to this negative picture is provided by the powerful concluding portrait of "the woman of valor" in Proverbs 31:10–31.

The fact that the later passage picks up some of the imagery of this chapter indicates that the corrective is highly deliberate. In view of the frequent charge that the Bible's perspective is "patriarchal," it is very interesting that the answer to the danger posed by the *femme fatale* is not a reassertion of male domination. Rather, it is a strong woman who speaks in a wise and faithful manner (31:26), who runs "her house" (31:15, 21, 27) in a way that models what it means to live according to "fear of the Lord" (31:30).⁷

Pray

Father, I commit myself to you, wholly, fully, and completely. I trust in your good and live-giving ways. Teach me how to understand my sexuality as you do. Give me ears to listen to your wise sages and the discernment to ignore clamoring voices of culture that have corrupted what you designed for my joy. Keep me from temptation and convict me when I step off the right path.

Thank you for your mercy and grace. I believe that you love me and embrace me, no matter what my sexual past. Thank you, Jesus for your sacrifice that covers all my sins. Lead me to be honest about any sexual sins I haven't dealt with. Forgive me.

⁷ Ellen F. Davis, 61–62.

Restore what has been lost and broken. You are the great physician. Bring healing to my wounds, old and new. To those caused by my own choices, and those inflicted on me by others.

Thank you Father, for your great and unending love. Amen.

Talk about it

- How can we attune our ear to God's wisdom so that it drowns out other voices? Discuss some practical things.

Coming next week

We're coming to the end of our Fool Proof series! Next week will pick up on a theme we began this week. We're going to focus on marriage. So, whether you're in one or just want to support one, be sure to study along.