

WISDOM: LIVING SUCCESSFULLY IN A TREACHEROUS WORLD
Preserving Purity, Pt 2

“Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it *flow* the springs of life.” ~ *Proverbs 4:23*

Review of Part 1

As stated by commentator Bruce Waltke, “The book of Proverbs remains the model of curriculum for humanity to learn how to live under God and before humankind” (*The Book of Proverbs 1-15*, xxi). As a “model curriculum,” it would be expected that the book devote significant attention to the issue of sexual purity, for few issues determine success in life as much as this one.

A survey of the book’s teaching (see 2:16-22; *5:1-23; *6:20-35; *7:1-27; 9:13-18; 23:26-28; 29:3; 30:20) yields **eight fundamental principles** essential in the battle for sexual purity. The first four have already been discussed (see “Preserving Purity, Pt 1,” 10/28/2020), and they include:

- 1. Keep your ears attentive to instruction.**
- 2. Acknowledge the power of temptation.**
- 3. Contemplate the hideousness of sexual sin.**
- 4. Remember the consequences of failure.**

The second four include:

5. We fight for purity by maintaining our distance from temptation’s sources.

Many men think they can relate to sexual temptation in the same way as Ulysses related to the mythical creatures called “the Sirens.” According to Homer’s tale, these “Sirens” pretended to be beautiful women with amazing voices. They were located on a particular island, and when sailors would navigate their ships close to this island the Sirens would begin to sing. The powerful charm of their voices would draw the sailors closer and closer to the rugged shore until their ships inevitably crashed and the sailors perished.

Ulysses was bent on sailing as close to these creatures as possible, while avoiding what had always been inevitable destruction. He plugged his rowers’ ears with bees’ wax so they could not hear the Sirens’ voices, leaving his own ears unplugged. He then had them tie him tightly to the ship’s mast so that he could not interfere with the efforts of the rowers once he fell under the Siren’s power. He gave his rowers strict instructions to row as close as possible to the island while avoiding the rocks, and then on to safety beyond the island’s dangerous shores and the Sirens’ voices. The plan worked. The men rowed close. Ulysses was able to behold the Sirens. Under their spell he desperately signaled his rowers to untie him, but they kept rowing until they sailed to safety. Disaster was avoided; Ulysses was gratified.

But the situation with temptation is very different. While many believe they can “hold fire in their bosoms without being burned” (cf. Prov 6:27), reality tells a much different story. Solomon recognized the idiocy of an Ulysses-like approach to sexual temptation and warned his son to stay far away from its source.

In particular, Solomon points his son to the reality of a “two-path” world. He emphasizes that many failures in life—including failures in the sexual realm—can be traced to a man’s naïve choice of a wrong path that eventually leads him too close to temptation. He may not set out to commit such sin intentionally. He may allow himself to get close but set off determined not to take the bait. But his carelessness in choosing his path sets himself up for eventual failure. Solomon describes such a scenario:

- **7:6-10** – “For at the window of my house I looked out through my lattice, and I saw among the naive, *and* discerned among the youths a young man lacking sense, passing through the street near her

corner; and he takes the way to her house, in the twilight, in the evening, in the middle of the night and *in* the darkness. And behold, a woman *comes* to meet him, dressed as a harlot and cunning of heart.”

This “young man lacking sense” irresponsibly—though perhaps unintentionally—wanders near the harlot’s house at the wrong time of day. He plays with fire and gets burned (7:21-23). In light of this danger, Solomon commands his son *not* to place himself in moral jeopardy by carelessly choosing the wrong path. Temptation is most easily avoided when the path that draws near to it is rejected.

- **5:8-9** – “Keep your way far from her and do not go near the door of her house, or you will give your vigor to others and your years to the cruel one.”
- **7:25** – “Do not let your heart turn aside to her ways, do not stray into her paths.”

In the arena of sexual temptation, men must **pay special attention to the issues of *availability (means) and opportunity (time)***.

- To maintain distance requires a recognition of how one needlessly draws near to temptation through *available means* such as a smartphone, an internet connection, or interaction with a certain group of people. These things can serve as the figurative “street near her [the harlot’s] corner” (7:8). To maintain distance requires making these things *unavailable* as the means through which temptation can arise.
- To maintain distance also requires a recognition of how one needlessly draws near to temptation through the *opportunity of free time and privacy*. These things are akin to “the twilight” or “darkness” which put the young man in a dangerous state (7:9). If experience shows that this private, free time is the normal time when temptation makes its move, a wise man will deny the opportunity by filling his time with family, fellowship, work, and ministry.

Indeed, we cannot confuse “maintaining distance” from the sources of temptation as synonymous with purity. Keeping away from such sources may really only lead to the negative *absence* of sin, not the positive *presence* of virtue. Moreover, Solomon warns not only of the temptations to *explicit* acts of sexual sin, but of the temptations to *non-physical* acts of sexual sin as well (“Do not desire her beauty in your heart,” 6:25). A man may have no opportunity or availability to commit the explicit acts but be nonetheless guilty of private, illicit thoughts (cf. also Matt 5:27-28). Nonetheless, there is a place for concrete, even radical measures to eliminate availability and opportunity:

If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. If your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to go into hell. (Matt 5:29-30)

And as Heath Lambert explains, “First, radical measures give you space in which to grow. Change takes time. . . . Second, employing radical measures gives you an opportunity to ‘produce fruit in keeping with repentance’ (Matthew 3:8)” (*Finally Free*, 73).

6. We fight for purity by taking full responsibility for our failures.

Common characteristics among men struggling with sexual sin are those of *feeling self-pity* and *engaging in blame-shifting*. “Life isn’t fair. I deserve at least some pleasure.” “It’s not my fault. After all, You gave me this body; I was created this way.” “God hasn’t given me a (good) wife.” Or, “She shouldn’t have dressed like that. It’s her fault.” But as strong as sexual temptation may be, Solomon never releases his son from full responsibility for failing to resist it. This is illustrated vividly in the hypothetical lament Solomon describes as coming from an older man who engaged in a life of sexual promiscuity:

- **5:7-14** – “. . . and you say, ‘How I have hated instruction! And my heart spurned reproof! I have not listened to the voice of my teachers, nor inclined my ear to my instructors! I was almost in utter ruin in the midst of the assembly and congregation.’”

Solomon also makes clear that regardless of the intensity of the harlot’s allure, the LORD will hold each man accountable and discipline him for his choices:

- **5:20-23** – “For why should you, my son, be exhilarated with an adulteress and embrace the bosom of a foreigner? For the ways of a man are before the eyes of the Lord, and He watches all his paths. His own iniquities will capture the wicked, and he will be held with the cords of his sin. He will die for lack of instruction, and in the greatness of his folly he will go astray.”
- See also **1:24-33**.

There are no excuses. **Wisdom’s law of personal responsibility** is especially applicable in the arena of sexual morality. Every man is fully responsible for every thought and act. Therefore, the path to purity will only be won by taking full responsibility and refusing to feel self-pity or engage in blame-shifting.

7. We fight for purity by delighting in marriage’s provision for intimacy.

Only one in five Millennials is married—half the number of the previous generation at the same age (Pew Research, 2010). While God created marriage as His final and most amazing work (Gen 1:31), an increasing number of men are delaying marriage for less than noble reasons—and putting themselves into harm’s way as a result. The delay of marriage greatly increases opportunity for sexual sin.

Solomon recognized that the fight for purity encompassed not only the act of mortification (putting to death the deeds of the flesh), but also the act of vivification (living out virtue). His proverbs reflect his awareness that God created man and woman to become “one flesh” (Gen 2:24-25), and that this was not only for the sake of procreation, but for enjoyment. It is this very enjoyment that can serve as a healthy buffer against the wiles of sexual temptation.

Solomon’s “Put Off / Put On” Instruction	
Mortification (“Put off!”)	Vivification (“Put on!”)
<p>“Now then, my sons, listen to me and do not depart from the words of my mouth. Keep your way far from her and do not go near the door of her house, or you will give your vigor to others and your years to the cruel one; and strangers will be filled with your strength and your hard-earned goods will go to the house of an alien; and you groan at your final end, when your flesh and your body are consumed” (Prov 5:7-11).</p>	<p>“Drink water from your own cistern and fresh water from your own well. Should your springs be dispersed abroad, streams of water in the streets? Let them be yours alone and not for strangers with you. Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth. As a loving hind and a graceful doe, let her breasts satisfy you at all times; be exhilarated always with her love” (Prov 5:15-19).</p>

Elsewhere Solomon states, “Enjoy life with the woman whom you love all the days of your fleeting life which He has given to you under the sun; for this is your reward in life and in your toil in which you have labored under the sun” (**Ecclesiastes 9:9**).

Ultimately, there are only two options in God’s plan for the unmarried: (1) be content in chaste singleness (cf. 1 Thess 4:3); or (2) get married (1 Cor 7:9). If a man “burns” to get married (which is a good thing), his chief objective should be not merely to find a woman to marry, but to make himself *marriageable*. The greatest, most influential step in this process is to learn “the fear of the LORD” (Prov 1:9; 9:10).

“The best defense against the wiles of the ‘strange’ woman is a vital relationship with one’s proper sexual partner—the wife.” —Longman, *Proverbs*, 160

8. We fight for purity by taking responsibility to pass it on to our children.

In an age where the government seeks absolute control over the education of children in the area of sexuality, it is vital for fathers to be proactive and protective in teaching their children God’s wisdom in this crucial area. As one commentator notes, “Each of the three discourses about adultery [5:1-4; 6:20-24; 7:1-5] comes from the lips of a father to his beloved son. This reminds us of the duty of parents to teach their children about the sexual facts of life” (Newheiser, *Opening Up Proverbs*, 72).

The singular address, “My son” (בְּנִי) is used 22 times in the book. The plural address, “O sons” or “My sons” (בְּנֵי) is used another 3 times. Of these 25 occurrences, eight (or one third) are connected directly to his instruction on sexual purity (2:1, 16-22; 5:1, 7, 20; 6:20; 7:1, 24; 23:26). Solomon clearly believed that children could not be left to lean on their own understanding or experiences in developing a right understanding of sexual morality. After all, “foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child” (22:15a). Parents—and fathers in particular—must take an active role in teaching their children the ways of wisdom.

A Final Note

As Newheiser states, “There is no topic in Proverbs to which more emphasis is given than that of sexual purity” (*Opening up Proverbs*, 71). But that emphasis rightly leads to a larger question: What hope is there for those who fail? As Solomon confessed, “Who can say, ‘I have cleansed my heart, I am pure from my sin’?” (20:9). Solomon himself woefully failed in all the principles he established.

Ultimately, the high standard of God’s holiness must lead us to a recognition of our own inability. It must lead us to a realization that we need a great Savior. And that is exactly who Jesus is. His saving power is greater than the worst sexual sin. He provides the forgiveness and transformation needed. Turn from your sin, believe in Him, and rest in His compassion.

- **28:13** – “He who conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes *them* will find compassion.

For Further Reflection

- Continue to read one chapter of Proverbs each day.
- What are the sources of sexual temptation in your life? What practical things can you do to maintain distance from those sources, and therefore limit exposure to temptation’s lure?
- Radical steps to remove sources of temptation are very helpful for those struggling with ongoing patterns of sexual sin. Yet one must never equate these external acts with true holiness. Why?
- Read Galatians 6:1-2. How should brothers in Christ help those who are struggling in the area of sexual temptation? What dangers must be avoided in providing this help?
- Spend time this week studying 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8. As you do, read through the commentary provided in the MacArthur Study Bible. Come ready to share your observations with the group.
- Spend extra time this week in prayer for the members of your group, asking the Lord to grant conviction and courage to pursue a life of sexual purity, “for this is the will of God” (1 Thess 4:3).

This Week’s Audio & Notes: gracechurch.org/motw ***Next Meeting:*** Nov 11 – “Keeping Silent”