

THE WISDOM OF MORAL PURITY

Proverbs - Selected Verses

The first thing that pops into most people's minds when they hear a word such as "immorality" is some improper behavior related to sex. The same thing occurs when we hear the term "lust." There are a lot of other areas of "bad behavior" that could be classified as "immoral" and we can have very strong desires (lusts) for things that are not in any way related to sex. That tendency to assume some sexual connotation should cause us to wonder why we think that way. Some have argued that in this area of our lives we have such strong drives and these "passions" are so difficult to control that this subject occupies an inordinate level of awareness in the human psyche.

The presence of a desire or a basic drive in the makeup of our humanity does not imply a license to act on that desire without regard to the context of what is proper and appropriate. There are many things that are good, pleasing, and beneficial in the proper context but can be bad, disgusting, and destructive when done outside the bounds of what is appropriate. The perfect examples of the extremities of the consequences of appropriate and inappropriate behaviors are seen in this subject matter of sexual behavior.

The writer of Proverbs has a large number of statements regarding proper behavior related to relationships. As you have likely noticed, there is no discussion in these verses with regard to what behaviors are proper or improper. If the Bible is silent on such topics then we should assume that the answer of what is right and wrong is so obvious that it does not even need to be stated. Additionally, all of the comments are related to "man-woman" interactions. There is no mention of homosexual behavior or adult-child interactions since these practices were so abhorrent that it was understood that these were never to be done regardless of what the relationship might be by redefining such things as "marriage."

The comments were originally written to record the teaching that a father was giving to his son. As a consequence, the dangers to the son were framed in the context of temptation that would come from a woman who was not his wife. The lessons are equally applicable to a daughter who might be tempted by a man who was not her husband.

Also absent in these teachings on the subject of someone involved in tempting or seducing another person is any comment as to the motivation of why a person would try to tempt another person to engage in immoral behavior. I'm sure there are a variety of reasons that could be cited and we might benefit from knowing the reasons why, however, the responses we take to the temptation and the consequences of our choices are the things that really matter.

Some basic fundamental, bottom line things to keep in mind is that temptation nearly always involves deception in that it promises benefits that are either not realized or the fulfillment is brief and fleeting and the initial "joy" is replaced by permanent "woe." Immoral behavior will always end in ruin and will eventually be more costly than the value of any imagined benefits. We can find the tools we need to make the right choice in the principles and precepts found in the word of God and these will keep us on the pathway to honor and off the road to disgrace.

Bitter Deception – 5:3-6

³ For the lips of an adulteress drip honey And smoother than oil is her speech; ⁴ But in the end she is bitter as wormwood, Sharp as a two-edged sword. ⁵ Her feet go down to death, Her steps take hold of Sheol. ⁶ She does not ponder the path of life; Her ways are unstable, she does not know *it*. Proverbs 5:3-6 (NASB95)

If something is not normally or naturally pleasant, attractive, enticing or desirable to a

person, then there would not be any element of temptation. (I choose the adjectives normally and naturally to eliminate aberrant actions that may appeal to a small segment of people.) The decision of whether to follow through or take a step toward or away from whatever seems to be desirable must be made in light of the likely and the possible unintended consequences.

I have a small animal trap that I have used to catch squirrels that invade my garden to eat corn and tomatoes. I put bait in the trap to lure the squirrel into the trap. I try to find something that would be more enticing than corn or tomatoes to a squirrel to bait the trap. If the squirrel is not wary or just doesn't see the wires of the trap or has not seen a trap before, then he gets caught.

Physical beauty and pleasant or flattering speech is attractive to other people. Most of us enjoy being in the presence of someone who has such qualities and we may tend to avoid people who do not have such attributes. Since all of us have an appreciation for this reality with regard to physical appearance, then most of us do things to make ourselves look "presentable" if not "attractive" since it helps in interpersonal relationships. There is a fairly wide spectrum of appearances that are helpful, however, we find that the extremes can be counterproductive. Someone who opts for the "low end" of the spectrum can be a "turn off" or repulsive to others. Going too far to the "high end" of the spectrum can be a "turn on" or overly attractive to others which may be misinterpreted by some to be an invitation for something beyond casual interactions.

The same thing can be said regarding "what we say and the way we say it." We have a wide range of what is acceptable and helpful in day-to-day interactions with others. We certainly want to avoid the extremes of harsh and crude speech and overly saccharine or effusive speech. We should want people to respond to the content of what we say rather than the way we say it.

I would think that if we realized that someone was deliberately attempting to entice us into an inappropriate relationship that most people with common sense would either ignore it or do something to avoid it – like run away. Problems develop when the words we say or the actions we take (trying to be funny or even flirtatious) are misinterpreted and lead to more familiarity than is appropriate and then a person may find himself or herself on a path they would have never intentionally taken. How many times have you heard someone say in the aftermath of having ruined their marriage and destroyed their career and family, "I never intended for it to go that far.?" This is another case where an ounce of prevention is worth a ton of cure.

It is likely that each of us knows someone whose actions could be described as being "on the prowl" in that they are actively looking for some illicit liaison with another person. Such people could be described by many adjectives, but the one common characteristic is that they are living for the present moment and have not given a lot of thought to where the path they are on will eventually lead. This is the implication of verse six in the more modern translations. The person who is initiating the temptation is more or less oblivious to the being on the wrong road.

The older translations (such as the King James Version) and Young's Literal Translation focus on the person being tempted. The message is simply that if the person being tempted does not consciously consider the paths of (or to) life (God's ways and precepts) then he (or she) will not be aware that the way he is being enticed to go is not going to take him to where God would have him to be. The idea that the "tempter's path has moved" is a message that the destination of that path is somewhere other than the abundant life.

Some of the older commentaries see the idea of the tempter's path being moveable is that the person doing the tempting will use a variety of different enticements to lure another person into a wrong relationship. The remedy for such deception is constant awareness and being

focused on the objectives we have for ourselves. If we do not have an objective for our lives, then how can we make a decision as to whether or not a particular activity or behavior will lead us toward or away from the objective? “No decision” is usually the path of least resistance which is naturally downhill.

Utter Downfall – 5:7-14

⁷ Now then, *my* sons, listen to me And do not depart from the words of my mouth. ⁸ Keep your way far from her And do not go near the door of her house, ⁹ Or you will give your vigor to others And your years to the cruel one; ¹⁰ And strangers will be filled with your strength And your hard-earned goods *will go* to the house of an alien; ¹¹ And you groan at your final end, When your flesh and your body are consumed; ¹² And you say, “How I have hated instruction! And my heart spurned reproof! ¹³ “I have not listened to the voice of my teachers, Nor inclined my ear to my instructors! ¹⁴ “I was almost in utter ruin In the midst of the assembly and congregation.” Proverbs 5:7-14 (NASB95)

Solomon had just warned any who would listen to him to NOT listen to and be charmed by the tempting words and allure of sexual immorality. The second part of the strategy that he advocated in verses 7 and 8 is to stay far away from anything that could provide such temptation.

It is a lot easier to avoid going to certain physical places or areas of a town where there are known temptations than to avoid letting our thoughts go into such areas. We can't keep thoughts and images from entering our minds, but we can certainly avoid dwelling on such thoughts. I think it was Martin Luther who said that you can't keep the birds from flying over your head, but you can prevent them from building a nest in your hair.

The advice from Solomon is simply, “don't go there!” The battleground is in the mind. In the epistle of James he gives a warning of what can happen if we “go there” even in our minds: “*But when a man is tempted, it is his own passions that carry him away and serve as a bait. Then the passion conceives, and becomes the parent of sin; and sin, when fully matured, gives birth to death.*” (James 1:14-15)

The pathway to death resulting from such immoral behavior is a rough road. One of the hazards along that road is giving away or losing your honor, strength, vigor, wealth, riches, reputation and self-respect. Under the Hebrew law (Deut 22:22), adultery was punishable by death or the sentence could be commuted to being sold as a slave. Perhaps this is what is implied by one's life being given over to the cruel one.

Even when that harsh punishment was not enforced, there remained the possibility of getting some debilitating diseases which would turn out to be a “cruel master” and destroy a person physically and mentally.

When all of these various evil results and almost every bad thing you could imagine happen, then a person is left with little more than regret and sorrow. In the end, all pretense that everything is OK is lost as everyone (the congregation, the community) can see it happening.

Ask Questions – Consider Consequences – 5:20-23

²⁰ For why should you, my son, be exhilarated with an adulteress And embrace the bosom of a foreigner? ²¹ For the ways of a man are before the eyes of the LORD, And He watches all his paths. ²² His own iniquities will capture the wicked, And he will be held with the cords of his sin. ²³ He will die for lack of instruction, And in the greatness of his folly he will go astray. Proverbs 5:20-23

Starting in verse 15 and continuing through 19, Solomon gives excellent advice to direct a man's attention to the legitimate relationship he has with his wife and find ways to kindle the infatuation that initiated that relationship. He concluded his advice with a rhetorical question of why should a person be infatuated with a complete stranger when you can cultivate that relationship with someone you already know.

The unintended consequences of a relationship with someone whom you do not know are too devastating to even consider going down that path. For those who may think that the possibility of utter ruin and being exposed for all to see would not happen to them (see verse 5:14), they should remember that even though none of their friends or family may find out, God sees all that is happening and his justice will eventually prevail. Some will argue that they can get forgiveness by being presumptuous with regard to God's grace and mercy, but the consequences of their actions will still come about even though they find forgiveness when they repent. For example, in the case of David and Bathsheba, he found forgiveness, but the results that worked out in his life and those around him were devastating.

In many cases, in this life, the consequence of sin is the means of punishment for that sin. The first of these consequences is that of being trapped or ensnared. We make a "big deal" about our freedom and that we want to "do our own thing." The irony of that desire is that unrestrained and undisciplined freedom is the worst kind of snare that you might imagine. The unintended consequences of going outside of the boundaries of legitimate behavior can be death.

There is a better way and it is available to all who will simply listen to, learn, and live out the teachings of God's word and this will keep us out of trouble.

Walk in Wisdom, Avoid Disgrace – 6:23-35

²³ For the commandment is a lamp and the teaching is light; And reproofs for discipline are the way of life ²⁴ To keep you from the evil woman, From the smooth tongue of the adulteress. ²⁵ Do not desire her beauty in your heart, Nor let her capture you with her eyelids. ²⁶ For on account of a harlot one is reduced to a loaf of bread, And an adulteress hunts for the precious life. ²⁷ Can a man take fire in his bosom And his clothes not be burned? ²⁸ Or can a man walk on hot coals And his feet not be scorched? ²⁹ So is the one who goes in to his neighbor's wife; Whoever touches her will not go unpunished. ³⁰ Men do not despise a thief if he steals To satisfy himself when he is hungry; ³¹ But when he is found, he must repay sevenfold; He must give all the substance of his house. ³² The one who commits adultery with a woman is lacking sense; He who would destroy himself does it. ³³ Wounds and disgrace he will find, And his reproach will not be blotted out. ³⁴ For jealousy enrages a man, And he will not spare in the day of vengeance. ³⁵ He will not accept any ransom, Nor will he be satisfied though you give many gifts. Proverbs 6:23-35 (NASB95)

If you are walking in the dark, it is most helpful to have a flashlight (or a torch) to help you find a safe path. If you don't own a flashlight, then you can wind up stepping in places and things that can make a mess and lead to misery. We look around our current culture and we wonder why so many people are doing such crazy things and making a mess of their lives. It is not necessarily because they are stupid, but it is likely because they don't have a flashlight. When a nation turns it back on the word of God, the people lose their lamp and the benefit of that light and they are really in the dark. It is not surprising that so many get involved in bad situations that can literally ruin their lives.

We see that the problem starts in the heart with our own desires and those desires can be ignited by visual stimulus of something as simply as the fluttering of eyelashes or some other "action" that is interpreted as an enticement. If such passions get ignited then the fire will burn something.

There is a price that comes with such unleashed passions. Three situations are presented with increasing costs. The price of a harlot may not cost more than a loaf of bread; however, an adulteress can wind up gaining control of your wealth. There are people (and this applies to both men and women) who will seduce someone for the purpose of improving their financial security. A man who seduces and betrays is called a Lothario and a woman is typically called a gold digger. Even if that is not the motivation, the involvement can still be costly in ruined marriages and lives and reputations.

Going a step further into an area of danger is a person who seduces a neighbor's wife or husband. Such involvements cannot only be costly financially and emotionally, but people have been killed because of such illicit relationships.

Verse 32 sums it up very well: When a person's passions are heated up they lose their good sense. In that loss, the benefits of the word of God are lost to us, the enjoyment of the sexual experience that God had intended for the context of marriage is lost, there is financial loss, loss of reputation, loss of peace with a neighbor, loss of freedom in the case of something illegal being done, and for some there is a loss of health. It doesn't take a lot of smarts to compare the pluses and the minus and conclude that such behavior is just not worth it.

The conclusion regarding immorality is simple: Don't go there!