

Proverbs 5:1-23, Men and Sex No. 3

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With these three Lord's Day evening sermons we are introducing a new ministry to our men which bears the name *Genesis 39*, as you know the chapter that provides us with the Bible's finest example of a believing man courageously resisting sexual temptation. Sexual temptation has always been a serious problem for men – the Bible in a variety of ways bears eloquent testimony to that fact – but in our time, with pornography now so easily accessible and with sexual titillation a daily feature of television and internet, the problem has been greatly magnified. In the United States today the swimsuit issue of *Sports Illustrated*, which even the editors of the magazine don't deny is a form of soft-porn, is a cultural icon. We have become a nation of voyeurs and in an environment so hostile to sexual purity and chastity of mind and behavior, the Christian man has his work cut out for him.

In the first two of these three sermons we have approached the problem of sinful sexual desire as a struggle common to men, even to the godliest of men – remember Thomas Boston and the others –, a struggle that has often lasted the man's entire life, and as the type of sin that has a variety of sinister effects – effects that we are now facing throughout our society –, and as a *besetting sin*, that is a sin that gathers strength from our nature as men and is particularly difficult to eradicate. In other words putting this sin to death will be no walk in the park. Men know this; they know it all too well. They know very well how difficult it is to manage this area of their lives in purity. I remember Dorothy Sayers' recollection of a young man who came to her after a lecture she had given on the seven deadly sins and said to her “with perfect simplicity: ‘I did not know there were seven deadly sins; please tell me the names of the other six.’” [In Coomes, 89,] Paul himself speaks of sexual desire as a burning passion that must be controlled if we are to live holy lives.

There are, broadly considered, three directions from which sin is attacked in the Christian life. *The first is theology*. Here the entire reality of sin and the struggle with sin is dealt with according to first principles. I mean such principles as these: 1) Christ died to deliver us from both the guilt and the power of sin and by his death and resurrection and by his gift of the Holy Spirit he has set us free from the dominion of sin. We now have the freedom to live pure and holy lives. 2) Sanctification is as surely a part of God's salvation of sinners as justification, the transformation of life as surely Christ's saving gift as the forgiveness of our sins. Indeed, true gospel holiness of life has even been called by our authorities “the better half of salvation.” God called us and Christ died for us, Paul tells us in Ephesians 1, *that we should be holy*. So it is God's will that we should be sanctified, a statement Paul makes in 1 Thess. 4 and which he continues with the words, “that you abstain from sexual immorality, that each one of you control his own body in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God.” Christ went to the cross that we might live chaste, pure and holy lives. 3) Our lives will be judged, even if we are true Christians our lives will be judged on the last day according to the deeds done in the body whether good or evil and we will receive what is due us for them. It was Paul, the champion of free grace and justification by faith who wrote that. We face an accounting on the last day, [2 Cor. 5:10] 4) God has so loved us and Christ has made such terrible sacrifices for us that it is the obligation of gratitude and love that we live to please him, which, we know

very well from the Word of God, sinful sexual thoughts and deeds do not do. As Paul says in another place, “You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.” [1 Cor. 6:19-20] *These theological considerations demonstrate that not only are we able not to sin, but we have all the motivations we should ever need to put this sin to death.*

The second direction from which sin is attacked in the Word of God is ethics. We have been commanded in God’s law to be sexually pure in thought, speech, and behavior. One of the Ten Commandments is a demand for sexual purity. Christ made a point in his great Sermon on the Mount of the fact that obedience to the 7th commandment was as much an obedience of the mind and heart as it was of outward behavior. We are, he said, not to look upon a woman lustfully, that is with sexual desire, unless that woman is our wife (or perhaps our fiancé). So much of our sin, whether pride or hatred or disrespect or envy or lust, happens first in our hearts and is nourished in our hearts. It cannot be given free rein in our hearts if we desire to remove it from our behavior. The law of God *forbids* sexual sin in heart, in speech, and in behavior.

Sexual immorality is repeatedly identified as a sin in the Bible, as the kind of sin that condemns men to spiritual death, as the very sin from which Christ delivers his people. We are commanded to put our sins to death and to live righteously. As Christians we are men under orders and it is ours to obey those orders.

The third direction from which sin is attacked in the Word of God is wisdom. We have been studying James in the Lord’s Day evening sermons of late and so we have been reminded what wisdom is in the Bible. It is that skill of living rightly and well, that *savoir faire* that enables a believer to fashion a holy life in defiance of the temptations that he or she faces, in defiance of the opposition of the world, the flesh, and the devil. Wisdom is something other than the law of God. It is not obedience so much as the means and method of obedience. Someone has said that it concerns matters too fine to be caught in the mesh of the law. It has to do with life issues as diverse as handling peer pressure or cultivating an ethic of hard work, making a wise choice of one’s friends or governing one’s tongue, and so on. In this way it has to do with strategy and tactics in the battle against temptation.

Take, for example, the case of David and Bathsheba and the sordid mess that resulted from David’s succumbing to sexual temptation. That episode, as it is recounted in 2 Samuel 11, begins with this: “In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, David sent Joab, and his servants with him (that is, the commanders), and all Israel (that is, the army). And they ravaged the Ammonites and besieged Rabbah. But David remained at Jerusalem.” We are being told in no uncertain terms that David’s adultery with Bathsheba would never have happened had he simply attended to his duties, had he left the city with the army *as he was supposed to have done; as his duty required him to do.* David’s idleness proved to be the devil’s playground. It is wisdom to understand that a believing man or woman is never safer from the clutches of temptation than when he or she is hard at work doing what ought to be done.

Or consider the Song of Songs, as we have now learned to read that wonderful poem. It concerns a young fellow and gal who are very much in love - think of them perhaps in their early or middle teens, people married young in those days - and want to get married, but she is judged by her brothers – her father apparently had already died – to be too young for marriage. So they

require her to wait and they do not allow her to spend, we would say, “quality time” alone with her beau. The poem is all about the pent up longing of the young couple for one another, the strength of their sexual desire for one another, and the steps that were taken to keep them apart until it was time for marriage (the wedding night, remember, is described in the exact middle of the poem (the last verse of chapter 4, the first verse of chapter 5, 111 lines before that one verse, 111 lines after that second verse), a poem written in a chiastic structure, that is, a poem that begins at each end and ends in the middle). At both the beginning and the end of the poem the girl expresses her frustration at not being able to be with the young man she loves.

I am very dark, but lovely,
 O daughters of Jerusalem,
 Like the tents of Kedar,
 Like the curtains of Solomon.
 Do not gaze at me because I am dark,
 Because the sun has looked upon me.
 My mother’s sons were angry with me;
 They made me keeper of the vineyards,
 But my own vineyard I have not kept! [1:5-6]

That is her comment on her situation. She is in love but her brothers who think she is not yet ready for marriage – remember, they married quite young in those days – realize that instead of sitting at home stewing over her situation, she needs something *to do*! So they put her to work on the family farm, tending the grape vines. That is why she is dark. She has acquired a tan from being outside in the sun. She is keeping the vineyards, but her own vineyard – her heart, her love, her passion for her beau – she has not been able to keep! Now, at the end of the poem, in the parallel section of the chiasmus, we have this.

We have a little sister,
 And she has no breasts.
 What shall we do for our sister
 On the day she is spoken for?
 If she is a wall,
 We will built on her a battlement of silver,
 But if she is a door,
 We will enclose her with boards of cedar.

That is the brothers saying the same thing their little sister said at the beginning of the poem. She is too young and we are not letting any young man get to her, no matter how much they seem to love one another. She must wait until the proper time. And, as at the beginning, she doesn’t agree that she is not ready for love. Those sentiments of her brothers are followed by hers.

I was a wall,
 And my breasts were like towers;
 Then I was in his eyes
 As one who finds peace.
 Solomon had a vineyard at Baal-hamon;

He let out the vineyard to keepers;
 Each one to bring for its fruit
 A thousand pieces of silver.
 My vineyard, my very own, is before me;
 You, O Solomon, may have the thousand,
 And the keepers of the fruit two hundred.

In other words, once again she doesn't agree. She *is* ready for love, she thinks, and is frustrated at having to wait. Once again we have mention of a literal vineyard, Solomon's cared for by tenant farmers, and a figurative one, her heart. What we have in this poem, a poem that belongs to the *wisdom literature* of the Bible, is an account of a young couple, very much in love, making their way to marriage *in a way that preserves their chastity in largest part because it wasn't the way chosen by the couple themselves*. This is wisdom, the sort of wisdom now sadly lacking in our culture. We throw young men and women together, let them spend time alone, and somehow expect that they will not fall prey to the tremendously powerful temptations of sexual desire. Dumb, dumb, dumb! The ancients knew better; good grief, Americans knew better than that not so many years ago. Any wise parent sets up barriers and keeps their children within those barriers until they are of an age to navigate the waters of sexual desire for themselves. And, frankly, a longer young adulthood without marriage, now typical of our culture, makes matters much, much worse. Alas, every survey confirms that young evangelicals in vast numbers are sleeping with their boyfriends and girlfriends.

Still, you see, how best to prevent sexual sin among the young and before marriage is a wisdom question. The law says that fornication is sin, but it is wisdom that teaches us *how to keep* that law when sexual urges are as strong as they are, when young people have a lot to learn, and when sins of this sort can do such terrible damage, indeed *destroy* in many respects a young person's life before it has well and truly begun. One piece of wisdom is to keep busy; another is to avoid being alone with someone you are sexually attracted to.

So it should not be difficult for anyone to see that *what we need* in the struggle against the use of pornography, accessible at the push of a button as it has become, *is wisdom*. We need skill, savvy; we need to be crafty, we need to become, as it were, technicians of the holy life, inventive, astute, ingenious, and resourceful, all the things the Bible means by *wisdom*. We need to learn how to weaken the temptation and strengthen our resolve, we need to learn how to live our lives in a way that, as much as possible, separates us from temptation and, at the same time, cultivates a pattern of living naturally resistant to sexual sin.

The text we have read this evening is one example of how that skill is obtained and some of what it consists of. In the first nine chapters of Proverbs, the introduction of the book – the proverbs themselves don't begin until chapter 10 – a variety of subjects are taken up in what is rhetorically a speech by a father to his son commending to him a life of wisdom. Peer pressure, work ethic, money, speech, it all appears here. But by far the largest amount of attention is devoted to sexual purity, three separate sections, 66 verses out of the 256 verses in chapters 1-9, a quarter of the whole.

Chapter 5 is the first of these three sections devoted to the subject. The chapter begins characteristically:

“My son, be attentive to my wisdom; incline your ear to my understanding, that you may keep discretion and your lips may guard knowledge. For the lips of a forbidden woman drip honey and her speech is smoother than oil...”

The father’s point is that a young man, any man, must keep the truth alive in his mind and heart. Memorization and attention is fortification against temptation. Throughout the father urges his son to bind this instruction on his heart, even on his fingers (7:3). The pornographer or the prostitute knows exactly what he or she wants. They have a plan. They know what they are doing. But the believing man is far too often only half aware of what he wants or what he is doing. A Christian man has to make up his mind, he has to know what he wants, and he has to have his wits about him when the temptation appears. This is the point that the father makes again in 7:21-22:

“With much seductive speech she persuades him [in our day we might substitute pictures for speech]; with her smooth talk [or with those glossy images] she compels him. All at once he follows her, as an ox goes to the slaughter.”

That is how it happens again and again. We fall because we are not *mindful*, *not alert*, we have not got a clear picture of our life in our mind’s eye and so we are easily led astray. The reference to her seductive speech reminds us that there are all manner of ways in which sexual desire can be inflamed, a fact the father rings the changes on in chapter 7. The way a woman dresses, the way she talks, the way she walks, and on and on. The father is admitting that while sexual temptation is a power at all times and under any circumstances, there are factors and circumstances that make it more powerful still. Of course, if Proverbs were written in our day, pornography would be mentioned in its pages as another of the wiles of the evil one, another means by which half-thinking men are seduced and unmanned.

Next comes the warning. “Her feet go down to death; her steps lead straight to the grave.” One feature of any wise man or woman is that he or she can connect the dots, can connect behavior with its eventual consequences. In Proverbs, what makes a person a fool is not that he has a low IQ; it is rather and precisely this inability or unwillingness to calculate consequences. It is all very well, pleasant indeed, to while away the summer months entertaining oneself, but when the winter comes what will you eat? And in the same way, no one doubts the pleasure of the fulfillment of sexual desire, but how will that temporary pleasure seem to you when you are covered with shame, when you are exposed, when the girl calls you up to tell you she is pregnant, when your wife catches you on the computer, when you find yourself an addict and unable to escape the clutches of behaviors you know very well are destroying your life? This is a very important part of wisdom, the facing of likely, predictable consequences of sinful behavior and resisting temptation accordingly. Think; think; think!

But the father has more to recommend to his son than mental exercise. He wants his son to take steps.

“And now, O 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, lest you give your honor to others and your years to the merciless, lest strangers take their fill of your strength, and your labors go to the house of a foreigner.”

He addresses first his sons, not his son - everywhere else it's his son -, because he is thinking of the generations of the family to come. The imperative in verse 8 is singular; he has returned to his actual son, the son who is before him, but he is reminding him that it only takes one broken link to ruin the family's future. Serious stuff, this! Verses 9 and 10 describe the situation of the man caught in adultery. The poor fool is now to be ruined by the woman's husband and his family. He must pay for his crime, literally in those days, and the wealth of the family thus passes to another family entirely. In our day the penalties are different, but no less steep.

But notice the father's practical advice. If you want to remain free of the horrific consequences of this fleeting physical pleasure, *keep your distance*. If you don't enter her part of town, if you stay out of the red light district, how she dresses and what she says to potential customers can pose no temptation. That is typical biblical wisdom: take steps to avoid the occasions of sin or to remove the temptation altogether if that is possible. Jesus went so far as to say that we should gouge out our right eye or cut off our right hand if that is what it took to gain freedom from adulterous behavior. Can't see a woman if you have no eye, can't touch her if you have no hand. That is his point, however brutally put. Remember, in the Sermon on the Mount that almost grotesque commandment was given *in regard to sexual temptation and sexual sin*. That is what Jesus was talking about when he said to gouge out an eye or cut off a hand. But take the point. As more than one authority on the Christian life has pointed out, every commandment of God's law requires us to avoid everything that may tempt us to break it. Or, think of it this way, as Thomas Fuller put it: We should not 'hollo in the ears of a sleeping temptation.' There may be a temptation over there; we should have the good sense not to wake it up. Temptations are easiest to resist when we remain oblivious to them. Or as another put it in an equally homely way:

“If a giant knock while the door is shut, he may with ease be still kept out; but if once open, that he gets in but a limb of himself, then there is no course left to keep out the remaining bulk.” [Cited in NPNF, First Series, vol. 1, 156n] Give him an inch, he'll take a mile.

There are all sorts of ways in which Christian men can “keep [their] way far from her and...not go near the door of her house” or can keep the giant outside in regard to pornography. Some have gouged out their right eye and got rid of their computers and smart phones. Others have put accountability programs and filters on their machines. Others have put the computer in the front room of the house. We'll be talking about these and other ways in the *Genesis 39* Sunday school class.

The remainder of that paragraph, to v. 14, provides a ghastly picture of a man whose life has been shattered by sexual sin. But then the attention shifts to describe a more comprehensive solution to the problem of sexual temptation. What the father says here, a point made elsewhere, is the Bible's most comprehensive antidote to sexual sin. This too is a matter of wisdom, not of

law, but that does not make it any less important, any less necessary to the pursuit of sexual purity among Christian men and women.

Verses 15 and 16 refer to sexual intercourse with standard ancient near-eastern metaphors. “Flowing water,” “springs,” “streams of water,” are found in ancient near eastern love poetry and in the Song of Songs as metaphors for love-making. So when the father tells his son to “Drink water from your own cistern” he is telling him to enjoy his wife sexually, to quench his sexual thirst, as it were, with his own wife. The point is clear: you have a woman with whom to enjoy a sexual relationship, with whom to fulfill your sexual desires: *your own wife*. If the two of you enjoy such love, you will neither need nor want another woman.

Verse 18 then amounts to the father’s prayer that his son might find a woman to marry who can quench his sexual thirst, not once or twice, but throughout his life. True enough, the Song of Songs makes it clear that what is true for the gander should as well be true for the goose, but these early chapters of Proverbs, as you know, are written in the form of a father’s counsel to his son. So it is the wife here who is regarded, in this way, as the true solution to the problem posed by a husband’s sexual urges and desires.

1. “lovely deer” and “graceful doe” again, in the imagery of the ancient near east, describe the woman as beautiful and so sexually alluring. In the Song of Songs (2:9; 4:5) you have a similar use of animal images to describe the sexual charm of a member of the opposite sex.

Listen to this from Professor Bruce Waltke on his first thoughts about “a culture that uses animal imagery as evocative metaphors for erotica...” [I, 321]

“I had difficulty identifying with that culture and imagery until on one occasion, high up on Tel Hesi (an archaeological site, like most archaeological sites a small hill), I came into close contact with mountain goats and observed their bright, black eyes, their graceful limbs, and their irresistible silky hair.”

2. The reference to his wife’s breasts remind us that the subject in this text is sexual enjoyment, not procreation. These are not breasts for the suckling of a child but for the sexual pleasure of a husband. And continuing with the metaphor of drinking one’s fill, the idea is that there should be no more satisfying drink than that of a wife’s sexual love. Here the love-making of husband and wife is both fully satisfying and unending.

The sense both here and in the Song of Songs – and there is nothing more like the Song of Songs than Proverbs chapter 5 and vice versa; (indeed one reason we know that the Song is in fact part of the wisdom literature of the Bible and not its theological literature is its similarity to Proverbs chapter 5) - is that inhibitions are to be left behind in the marriage bed. In chapter 7 the father will describe to his son some of the aphrodisiacs that the prostitute employs to draw customers into her arms, but some of those same aphrodisiacs are mentioned in the Song of Songs as employed by the husband and wife on their wedding night. There is chastity in the Bible, to be sure, but there is no prudishness. Christian husbands and wives ought to be practiced lovers and if they are so,

they will go far toward protecting themselves against sinful sexual activities. The Apostle Paul says the same thing in the opening verses of 1 Cor. 7, but with much less sparkle and zest. Of course, he was not a married man. But he too in that chapter admits that marriage is or ought to be the antidote of sexual sin.

One of John Wenham's complaints about the church's sexual instruction of its people was that for far too long that instruction was given by men who were unmarried and had no real experience of wedded sexual bliss. [*Facing Hell*, 31] From Augustine to the Reformation that was certainly so and in some parts of Christendom it has continued to be so, to the real help of no one.

The chapter ends with a summary warning. The Lord knows what you are doing with your life and the Lord will call you to account.

Now you see how wisdom operates in this dimension of life - not just theology, not just ethics, but wisdom. It takes pains to make clear the likely consequences of sexual sinning of various kinds - nobody would do this if he could see clearly in his mind's eye what he is going to pay for having done so - and then insists that those consequences be kept in the mind's eye. Next it offers solutions, both for the unmarried and the married. Now, to be sure, we do not have an entire volume devoted to this one theme and the Bible does not address all the various features of sexual temptation or suggest all possible antidotes for them. But it tells us enough to enable us to develop our own forms of biblical wisdom to meet our own forms of temptation in our own time and place.

But the Bible has certainly given us the main insights of true wisdom in regard to sexual purity. We must be thoughtful, intentional about our lives and about the cultivation of holiness. We need to be thinking men. We need to think ahead of time, before the temptation appears, and when it comes we need to have thought about it so we know exactly what it is we are being tempted to do. We've got to know what we are doing and be clear in our own minds what we need to do, what we must not do *and why*. Further, we need to take steps to help ourselves. We need to avoid occasions of sin like the plague and we need to cultivate the virtues and the practices that lay the ax to the root of sexual temptation. A man who spends a lot of time and effort cultivating his love-making with his wife is in almost all cases going to be a man who finds pornography less enticing and godly sex more satisfying. One does not swipe an old heap off the street when he has a Cadillac at home in his garage! The Bible assumes that husbands and wives will have an active, enticing, even thrilling love life. It is the way God meant marriage to be. If our marriages are not like that - and I know, alas, that many Christian marriages are *not* like that - we are duty bound to correct that defect and make them so, for our wife's sake and for our own.

It is an interesting and important fact, usually overlooked, that Geneva in the time of John Calvin, so often criticized for being a kind of judgmental place, harsh place, demanding place, came to be known as *le paradis des femmes*, the paradise of women. There were good reasons for this. Calvin was strongly protective of the rights and the dignity of women in an age when virtually no one else was. Under Calvin's influence the church elders and the city magistrates went after men who abused their wives, guardians who misappropriated the trust funds of widows, and husbands who deserted their wives. In that era and for centuries before, powerful

and prosperous elderly men regularly entered into marriages with very young women. The families of the girls complied with these arrangements for financial and social considerations. Calvin felt strongly that such marriages ought to be forbidden. Rules were established to protect both men and women in their relations with one another. For example, strangers coming from distant lands were not permitted to marry in Geneva until a careful investigation of their family and their past was made. The first “background check,” if you will. [Hughes, 75] A woman persecuted for her faith could legitimately leave her husband.

There was a reason for these changes and this revolutionary attitude toward women and their rights, their privileges. It was the revival of the OT as the living Word of God to be believed and obeyed. The Bible links holiness of life with the law of God and with its wisdom, and both the law and wisdom, as we learn in the OT especially, are concerned with matters of everyday life. The result was what one scholar called “the secularization of holiness,” that is, holiness was made a matter of everyday life for every believer. Holiness was now everyone’s business, not just clerics, and that business concerned everything, especially personal relations, marriage, family management, and so on. That was a hugely important part of the Reformation’s rediscovery of the Bible. The Bible’s laws were once again applied to daily life.

Well, nowadays there is another reason for the church to become and to be *le paradis des femmes*. Christian women should not have to live with husbands who do not honor them with an exclusive love. They should not have to bear with husbands who divide their loyalty between them and other women on a computer screen or, worse, who become so enamored of the women they see in pornography that they are less interested in, less fixated on their own wives. Christian men know this. They believe this. They want to be men and husbands who honor their wives and who are scrupulously faithful lovers. But to be so they need all the help to be found in the Word of God, all of it: theology, ethics, and wisdom!