

**Then you will understand righteousness and justice and equity, every good path; for wisdom will come into your heart, and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul; discretion will watch over you, understanding will guard you, delivering you from the way of evil, from men of perverted speech, who forsake the paths of uprightness to walk in the ways of darkness, who rejoice in doing evil and delight in the perverseness of evil, men whose paths are crooked, and who are devious in their ways.**

**So you will be delivered from the forbidden woman, from the adulteress with her smooth words, who forsakes the companion of her youth and forgets the covenant of her God; for her house sinks down to death, and her paths to the departed; none who go to her come back, nor do they regain the paths of life.**

**So you will walk in the way of the good and keep to the paths of the righteous. For the upright will inhabit the land, and those with integrity will remain in it, but the wicked will be cut off from the land, and the treacherous will be rooted out of it.**

**(Proverbs 2:9–22)**

## Introduction

Michelle Vall is an amateur metal detectorist from Blackpool in England. Perhaps you were unaware that amateur metal detecting is a real thing, but apparently it is. Mrs. Vall describes herself as “a keen antique collector and walker.” Some time ago, she learned that amateur metal detecting is a popular activity in the UK, with clubs you can join for group participation. Realising that this activity combined both her passions – antique collecting and walking – she joined a club.

Last September, a charity detecting rally was held close to the historic field where the Battle of Bosworth was fought in 1485. Mrs. Vall detected metal at a certain spot and dug through about forty centimetres of clay before she spotted a glint of gold. She extricated a coin and took it back to the organiser’s tent, where one of the organisers excitedly identified it as a five hundred-year-old half angel – a very rare and valuable coin, which was official British currency between 1472 and 1663.

When it was decided that she had rights to the coin, she decided that it was too valuable to keep herself, and so she opted to sell it at an auction in December. Valuers expected the coin to fetch between £10,000 and £15,000; it eventually sold for £40,800 pounds (R670,000). She had searched for and secured treasure, and was privileged to be able to sell her treasure.

Previously, we saw that Proverbs 2 challenges the reader to go on a quest for wisdom. Verses vv. 1–5 picture the quester searching for wisdom, which is promised to those who are receptive to it (vv. 1–2) and who are resolved to acquire it (vv. 3–5). Resolve displays itself in a commitment to pray for wisdom and to search the Scriptures for wisdom.

Then, in vv. 6–8, we see the quester securing the wisdom for which he has searched. Those who are receptive to it, and who are resolved to find it, have the glorious promise that the Lord gives wisdom.

But treasure hunters get to spend their treasure, and the quester in Proverbs 2 has the same privilege. The treasure that he finds is “spent” to help him on his ongoing quest. That is the picture before us as we pick up where we left off last time.

## Spending Wisdom

Our quester has exercised the deliberate and difficult resolve to mine deeply for wisdom and has been rewarded for his efforts. Now, as the need arises, he has opportunity to spend the treasure that he has stored up. And the treasure that he has secured – wisdom – is spent in the pursuit of protecting the quester from folly.

## Preliminary Thoughts

Before we look at the specific examples of folly that Solomon offers, from which wisdom will protect the quester, it will be worth our while to make two preliminary observations.

First, as observed in our previous study, biblical wisdom has an ethical dimension. I will quote William Plumer again, who said, “The greatest wisdom on this earth is holiness.” Wisdom, according to vv. 6–8, produces those who are “upright” and who “walk in integrity” (v. 7). Biblical wisdom leads to “the paths of justice” (v. 8) and speaks to “righteousness and justice and equity, every good path” (v. 9). Biblical wisdom is ethical.

Given this ethical context, it is helpful to understand that, in Proverbs, the opposite of wisdom is not stupidity but infidelity. In other words, folly, as defined by our text, is not primarily lack of understanding (though it may include that) but lack of obedience. Like wisdom, folly manifests itself in action. Folly also has an ethical dimension. But its ethics lead away from wisdom and therefore away from God. Wisdom protects us from this folly.

Second, it will also be helpful to note that wisdom is designed to protect us both from the foolish and from their folly. Stated another way, those who are wise will recognise the need to steer clear of fools and of folly. If we are guarded by wisdom, we will avoid those who live foolishly, and also avoid living foolishly ourselves. So, when Solomon offers two examples of fools – evil men (vv. 9–15) and the forbidden woman (vv. 16–19) – his intent is not only to protect us *from* them, but also to protect us from *becoming* them.

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With these thoughts in our minds, let's consider the two examples that are set forth, from which wisdom will protect us.

## The Folly of Evil Men

First, biblical wisdom protects us from the folly of evil men.

Then you will understand righteousness and justice and equity, every good path; for wisdom will come into your heart, and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul; discretion will watch over you, understanding will guard you, delivering you from the way of evil, from men of perverted speech, who forsake the paths of uprightness to walk in the ways of darkness, who rejoice in doing evil and delight in the perverseness of evil, men whose paths are crooked, and who are devious in their ways.

(Proverbs 2:9-15)

Solomon reminds his son that wisdom produces holiness; it produces “righteousness and justice and equity, every good path” (v. 9). As you pursue these things, the wisdom of God provides protection—it watches, and guards, and delivers—from that which is *opposed* to “righteousness and justice and equity, every good path.” The opposite of these things is “the way of evil” (v. 12), which manifests itself in several ways.

As we look at the specifics, we must remember Solomon is presenting these things as *folly*. But folly has an ethical dimension, and these things are both foolish and evil—and those who engage in them have no promise of protection from God. If you want to lack security, if you want to remove God's protection from you, this is how to do it. Conversely, if you will enjoy divine guarding, you must avoid these manifestations of folly.

What does “the way of evil” look like? Here are three manifestations.

### Godless Speech

The way of evil is, first, manifested in godless speech: “from men of perverted speech” (v. 12). The word translated “perverted” literally speaks of something that is fraudulent. The idea here is speech that does not align with the truth of God. What exactly does “perverted speech” look like? Proverbs identifies numerous manifestations of perverted speech. We do not have the time here to survey all of them, but we can consider a few.

First, godless, perverted speech can be manifested as dishonesty. “A lying tongue” is one of the things that God detests (6:17), as is “a false witness who breathes out lies” (6:19). A false witness “is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts” and “a lying tongue is but for a moment” (12:17-19). “Lying lips are an abomination to the LORD” (12:22).

The God of the Bible is a God of truth, who hates that which is untruth. God's people are supposed to be like him, and since he is a God of truth, it does great harm to his character when his people utter untruth.

Further, dishonesty promotes disunity, which ought to be a shameful thing to God's people. "A dishonest man spreads strife, and a whisperer separates close friends" (16:28). I remember watching an episode of a particular TV program in which a group of friends was working together toward a common goal. An opponent, who had been prevented from harming them physically, assumed the persona of a friend, and one by one began to slander the friends to each other, lying about what each thought or said about the others. He sowed so much discord among them that the entire goal to which they were moving almost fell through. In the end, they realised what he was doing and reunited to pursue the common goal.

This is what evil looks like. Are you a person of honesty and integrity? Do you lie to get out of difficult situations? Do you delight in spreading lies and half-truths about others? Are you concerned to verify the truth of news that you report before you do so? Are you eager to share less-than-factual news about others to others, which you know will create disunity among them? If this is you, Solomon considers you to be on the way to evil. You have not yet embraced the wisdom of God, which is designed to guard you from this evil.

Second, godless, perverted speech can be manifested as slander. "Whoever utters slander is a fool" (10:18). "Whoever belittles his neighbour lacks sense" (11:12). "Whoever goes about slandering reveals secrets; therefore do not associate with a simple babblers" (20:19). It is an evil thing to speak evil of others—particularly, I would suggest, those whom God loves. Every human being is made in the image of God, and so to slander *anyone* is, in a sense, to slander God. But to slander one for whom Christ died is blasphemy on an entirely different level.

Significantly, Proverbs even rebukes those who slander others unintentionally: "With his mouth the godless man would destroy his neighbour, but by knowledge the righteous are delivered" (11:9). Notice that: The godless man will destroy his neighbour with his mouth, and the solution is "knowledge." Equipping yourself with the facts—with the truth about a situation—goes a long way to avoiding the folly of slander. Objecting that you never had all the facts is no excuse for slandering others. Ignorance of the facts does not excuse the sin.

Are you one who is tempted toward slander? Are you loose with your lips, always eager to speak evil of others? That, says Solomon, is the way of folly, which leads to destruction. Those who are quick to slander have not searched diligently for wisdom to protect them from evil.

Third, godless, perverted speech can be manifested as gossip. "Whoever covers an offence seeks love, but he who repeats a matter separates close friends" (17:9). "The words of a whisperer are like delicious morsels; they go down into the inner parts of the body" (18:8). One of the most extensive texts dealing with the sin of gossip is found in chapter 26:

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For lack of wood the fire goes out, and where there is no whisperer, quarrelling ceases. As charcoal to hot embers and wood to fire, so is a quarrelsome man for kindling strife. The words of a whisperer are like delicious morsels; they go down into the inner parts of the body. Like the glaze covering an earthen vessel are fervent lips with an evil heart. Whoever hates disguises himself with his lips and harbours deceit in his heart; when he speaks graciously, believe him not, for there are seven abominations in his heart; though his hatred be covered with deception, his wickedness will be exposed in the assembly. Whoever digs a pit will fall into it, and a stone will come back on him who starts it rolling. A lying tongue hates its victims, and a flattering mouth works ruin.

(Proverbs 26:20–28)

Gossip is treated with indifference by many in the world today – and, often, even as a positive thing! – but the Bible takes a decidedly negative view of it. Gossip is not just “not nice,” it is sinful – “the way of evil.”

Do you delight in gossip? Do you just *have* to be the first to let everyone know what you just heard about so-and-so? Are you so “burdened” that you must share “prayer requests” with others?

Importantly, gossip is not necessarily always untrue. You can gossip about things that are absolutely true. Gossip can be defined as *unnecessary* talk. If it is unnecessary for you to share something about someone, to share it is gossip.

We should also observe that the Bible not only condemns gossip itself, but even those who are willing to lend an ear to gossip and slander. “An evildoer listens to wicked lips, and a liar gives ear to a mischievous tongue” (17:4). There is no place in God’s church for those who will entertain gossip and slander. If you are guilty of doing so, Proverbs calls you an evildoer and a liar! It calls us to shut down those who would spread gossip. The King James translation of Proverbs 25:23 makes this appeal: “The north wind driveth away rain: so doth an angry countenance a backbiting tongue.” In other words, answering a gossipier with an angry countenance will shut him up.

The King James translation is a minority one (although it may well be correct). Modern translations speak of the north wind *bringing* rain rather than *driving away* rain. But even the alternate translation makes a similar point. “The north wind brings forth rain, and a backbiting tongue, angry looks.” Rather than entertaining gossip and slander, hearing it should produce in you an angry look, which in turns drives away the backbiting. When someone comes to you with a delicious morsel of gossip, you should confront them with an angry face and drive them away. To gossip and slander is to travel the way of evil; to invite gossip and slander is to do the same.

Fourth, godless, perverted speech can be manifested as bitterness. “Do not be a witness against your neighbour without cause, and do not deceive with your lips. Do not say, ‘I

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will do to him as he has done to me; I will pay the man back for what he has done” (24:28–29).

If you always feel the need to repay evil for evil—to give as good as you get—you have embraced folly and are on the way of evil. Instead, “let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person” (Colossians 4:6).

Jesus Christ is the ultimate example of one who was careful with his words. He always spoke the truth—even when doing so meant uttering difficult things. He did not gossip or slander others. And when he was reviled, he did not revile in return. He was controlled in the use of his tongue, and we cannot claim to be Christlike if we do not control our tongue.

It is worth reminding ourselves at this point that wisdom is designed to guard us not only from these behaviours, but from those who manifest these behaviours. If you are wise, you will associate with those who are careful with their tongue. Wisdom will not permit you to associate with liars, gossips and slanderers, or with those who are bitter and divisive. Even as *your* speech is gracious and edifying, you will look to spend time with *others* whose speech is gracious and edifying.

### Godless Behaviour

The way of evil is, second, manifested in godless behaviour: “who forsake the paths of uprightness to walk in the ways of darkness” (v. 13).

Once again, Proverbs reveals a wide array of godless behaviours that result from folly. It speaks of those who are given to anger and violence (3:31–35; 6:34; 13:2; 14:17; 14:29; etc.). It speaks of greed (23:20–21; 25:16; 27:20; etc.). It speaks to matters of integrity, or lack thereof (10:9–10; 11:1, 3; etc.). We will consider many of these behaviours as we proceed through Proverbs, but for now we must note, as we have already said, that folly has an ethical dimension. Wisdom *guards* from godless behaviour because it produces ethics in keeping with the character of God; foolishness *promotes* godless behaviour because it produces ethics in keeping with sinful, fleshly desires.

We live in an age when it is frowned upon to call into question the behaviour of others. Even in Christian circles, questioning a professing believer’s behaviour is often met by accusations of legalism. We are, in some ways, like the Corinthians, whose slogan was, “All things are lawful” (1 Corinthians 10:23). Kevin DeYoung was roasted on social media last year for writing an article in which he dared to suggest that it is an ethical problem for Christians to watch *Game of Thrones*. The outcry from the Christian community was immediate and loud, with accusations of legalism being flung left, right and centre. I’ve never watched *Game of Thrones*, and one review from the parents’ guide section of IMDB suggests that there is great wisdom in avoiding it:

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Sex is a driving force of this series, and full nudity occurs quite frequently throughout each season, including extended instances of exposed breasts, buttocks, and genitals (both male and female). Viewers can expect to see and hear graphic sex scenes, many of which take place in a brothel, as well as several scenes and situations of incest, rape, and sexual violence (primarily toward females).

Let me be so bold as to suggest that DeYoung was absolutely right. Such behaviours have no place in the mind and heart of Christ's people. Folly will allow you to be entertained by that; wisdom will protect you from it.

Wisdom will guide the way that we behave toward others. Wise people are honest in business, faithful in marriage, and submissive to authority. It is folly that drives us to embrace that which God condemns. Folly encourages us to "forsake the paths of uprightness and walk in the ways of darkness" (v. 13). Folly encourages us to associate with those who behave in this way, and who encourage us to do the same. Wisdom guards us from godless behaviour and godless behaviourists.

Jesus Christ walked according to wisdom, and therefore always behaved in a way that was pleasing to his Father (John 8:29). On the eve of his crucifixion, Jesus was able to pray, "I glorified you on earth." And how did he glorify his Father on earth? "Having accomplished the work that you gave me to do" (John 17:4). In fact, his behaviour was so blameless that the Father accepts his perfect righteousness on our behalf. Those who acknowledge their sinfulness and trust in the righteousness of Christ have his righteousness imputed to them.

### Godless Appetites

The way of evil is, third, manifested in godless appetites: "who rejoice in doing evil and delight in the perverseness of evil, men whose paths are crooked, and who are devious in their ways" (vv. 14–15).

Folly produces in us an appetite for that which God hates. If you find pleasure in doing evil, it is because you have embraced folly. Wisdom produces in people a desire to do and say and think those things that honour God. It protects from evil speech and evil behaviour because it gets to the root of our desires.

Are your deepest desires those things that honour God? If we were to see a snapshot of your deepest desire right now, would it embarrass you? Do you desire those things that bring shame to the name of Christ or do your deepest desires honour your Saviour? Do you desire to walk in the Spirit so as not to gratify the desires of the flesh (Galatians 5:16)? Are you committed to putting to death evil desires (Colossians 3:5)? Worldly desires are fleeting, but desires that align with God's word have eternal significance (1 John 2:17).

There is a sense in which this is the root of the issue, because appetites drive actions. Desires flow into deeds, and therefore godly desires produce godly behaviour.

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Conversely, godly behaviour is evidence of godly desires. For this reason, we can conclude that, once again, Christ exemplified these godly desires. His perfect behaviour, no doubt, flowed from perfect desires.

Once again, it is important to stress that wisdom protects us both from the behaviours and attitudes themselves as well as from those who exemplify these behaviours and attitudes. Wisdom guards us against personal folly and foolish companions. If we are wise, we will not be companions of those who exemplify these attitudes and actions and appetites. Wisdom will guard us from evil men.

## The Folly of the Forbidden Woman

The second example of folly, from which wisdom protects us, is the folly of the forbidden woman:

So you will be delivered from the forbidden woman, from the adulteress with her smooth words, who forsakes the companion of her youth and forgets the covenant of her God; for her house sinks down to death, and her paths to the departed; none who go to her come back, nor do they regain the paths of life.

(Proverbs 2:16–19)

It may be helpful to observe that, at least at this point, the father's major emphasis is not primarily the adulteress. He will address the matter of adultery and sexual temptation in chapters 5 and 7, but for now he is really just using the adulteress as an *illustration* of a bigger truth. "The adulteress symbolizes this barren world and its efforts to seduce us from the way of truth" (Brady). The loose woman in this context symbolises anyone or anything that would draw our attention away from full devotion to God and his wisdom.

With this in mind, let's listen as Solomon urges his son to be aware of three things.

### Her Methods

First, be aware of her methods: "So you will be delivered from the forbidden woman, from the adulteress with her smooth words" (v. 16).

The adulteress is a flatterer. In order to draw the object of her devotion away from fidelity to God, she speaks words that seem to encourage or uplift him. But she is sinister. Ultimately, she breaks down by giving the perception of building up.

Adultery is destructive. It breaks down families, tears apart marriages, and destroys those who engage in it. But this is not what it promises. It promises fulfilment, pleasure and satisfaction. And it perhaps delivers—for a period. But its allure never lasts. The adulteress is a skilled manipulator, who knows how to deceive. She knows the promises to make to draw her victim away. She can offer pleasure and appeal to the flesh. "The

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Strange Woman is seductive, offering charm, outward beauty, and sensual pleasures” (Newheiser).

So it is with anything that threatens our fidelity to God. The adulteress, remember, is just here an illustration of the broader threat of sin. Sin is always appealing. That’s why we give into it. It appeals to our desires and our flesh. Those who would draw us away from fidelity to Christ know this, and they present their temptations in such a way that they appeal to us.

In the heat of the moment, giving into the temptation to look at pornography is appealing. Giving into the temptation swear at the driver that just cut you off is appealing. Giving into the temptation to lie to your boss or your spouse or your parents is appealing. It feels good—for a moment. It produces the results that we desire—in the short term. Sin is appealing precisely because, for a moment, it gives us what we want. That is how temptation works—by offering us what we want—and we would do well to be aware of its methods.

## Her Character

Second, be aware of her character: “who forsakes the companion of her youth and forgets the covenant of her God” (v. 17).

The young man is easily tempted by the adulteress, not realising that she spreads a net for his feet, desiring to ensnare him in his transgression (29:5–6). She promises the world but intends destruction. Fidelity is no priority of hers. She doesn’t care that she has already abandoned her covenant to her husband and to God, and she now seeks to lead others down her destructive path.

Sin never has your best interests at heart. Sin never really cares about you. Beneath the shiny veneer lurks darkness. The sepulchre may appear beautifully whitewashed on the outside, but it is full of rotting bones within.

Let me say this as plainly as I can: *Those things that promise you the world – pleasure, success, fulfilment – but do so at the expense of fidelity to Christ and his church are not good for you and do not care about you.* Sin is never concerned for your wellbeing. Wisdom guards you by enabling you to see beyond the sensuality and the external beauty to the ugliness within.

Are you facing a career opportunity that seems to promise the world but threatens to draw you away from the church? Don’t go for it; it’s not good for you! Look past the external beauty to the ugliness within.

Is there some recreation in your life—good enough in and of itself—that promises you fulfilment at the expense of your devotion to Christ? Don’t be drawn away by the sensual allurements of the shiny externals. Loathe the rotting bones inside.

Are you entering into a relationship that promises happiness, but only if you will shrink back from your fidelity to Christ and his people? Don't be taken in by the adulteress. She doesn't care about you. Treasure a lasting relationship with Christ and his bride far above the fleeting relationship that appeals to your flesh.

## Her Destiny

Why is this so important? Because of the third thing to be aware of: her destiny: "for her house sinks down to death, and her paths to the departed; none who go to her come back, nor do they regain the paths of life" (vv. 18–19).

The adulteress is beautiful, or she would never be successful. She is sensual, or she would never draw away others after her. She is clever, for she knows how to appeal to your baser desires. But following her leads to death.

Death is all that sin has to offer. Death is the wages that you earn for a lifetime of sin. "The wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). Sin is appealing. It is sensual. It is pleasurable—for a season. Eternally, it offers only death. Those who follow the strange woman perish. They will be eternally destroyed. Follow her to the end, and you will never "regain the paths of life" (v. 19).

That is why wisdom is so important. Wisdom promises a greater destiny. Folly *leads to* death; wisdom *points to* death. But wisdom points to the death of another, who died in our place. Wisdom is found in the gospel, which promises eternal life instead of eternal death—but only through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The strange woman is beautiful, but "her house sinks down to death" (v. 18). Lady Wisdom's beauty may at first glance be less appealing, because her wisdom may at first appear to be folly. And it *is* folly—to those who are perishing. But to those who are being saved, it is the very wisdom of God.

The beauty of Lady Wisdom is true, lasting beauty, because it is the beauty of holiness, which leads to life eternal through the gospel of Jesus Christ. Who will you follow—the strange woman, or Lady Wisdom? Will you spend the wisdom that you have hoarded to protect you from the folly of evil men and the strange woman?

## Standing in Wisdom

The father closes this chapter with a word of promise to his son—if he will search for, secure, and properly spend wisdom:

So you will walk in the way of the good and keep to the paths of the righteous. For the upright will inhabit the land, and those with integrity will remain in it, but the wicked will be cut off from the land, and the treacherous will be rooted out of it.

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(Proverbs 2:20–22)

There is a simple contrast drawn here: “The upright” and “those with integrity” (i.e. those characterised by wisdom) will enjoy ongoing life and blessing, but “the wicked” and “the treacherous” (i.e. those characterised by folly) will be “cut off” and “rooted out.”

This is a strong warning. According to Bruce Waltke, the word translated “cut off,” when it is used of personal subjects (i.e. of people) means “annihilation.” Those who reject wisdom in favour of folly are warned in the strongest terms possible that death is their destiny. But those who search for wisdom, and secure it, and wisely spend it, will enjoy life.

In essence, the promise of these closing verses is the promise of the gospel. Paul tells us that the message of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but wisdom to those who are being saved. How you receive the gospel message is a matter of life and death.

If the message of Jesus Christ and his cross is folly to you, it is because you are perishing. And if you continue to view this message as a message of folly, you will finally perish and will never again “regain the paths of life” (v. 19). We are all born on the way of evil, destined for eternal destruction, and the only hope of finding life is repentance of sin and faith in the crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ.

Perhaps as you hear the message of a crucified Saviour, it sounds foolish. If so, you are destined to be “cut off” and “rooted out” (v. 22). If you want to avoid eternal destruction and instead enjoy eternal life, pray to God to show you that the message of the cross is the greatest wisdom you can know. Ask God to open your eyes to the wisdom of the gospel so that you can escape final, irreversible death and enjoy full, everlasting life in the presence of God and his Son, Jesus Christ. Only if you embrace the message of the cross as the wisdom of God will you “walk in the way of the good and keep to the paths of the righteous” (v. 20). May God open your eyes to the wisdom of the cross today.

AMEN