

How to Not Ruin Your Life: Live in Line with Reality (Proverbs 4–7)

Proverbs: The Wisdom of God as a Way of Life

Zionsville Fellowship | September 14, 2025 | Drew Hunter

We saw real evil these weeks—on the subway in Charlotte, and the campus in Utah.

There are many things to think and say and do about these. This morning we're going to consider how these kinds of tragedies happen. How does someone get to the point of doing this? What does this tell us about the human condition? And how can we make a difference in the world?

We've seen the past weeks how Proverbs is more relevant than we may have thought. It is not just a collection of disconnected bits of advice for decision making. *It is about seeing reality, learning to love it, and living in line with.* It is recognizing that God designed the world to work a certain way; and wisdom embraces that and lives in light of it. There is a grain of creation, and wisdom is about learning to live along its grain. It is learning to swim along the creational current.

Last Sunday we saw what is at stake if we reject wisdom.

After the introduction to the book, proverbs immediately launches into an extreme scenario. Proverbs 1:10–11, “My son, if sinners entice you, do not consent. If they say, “Come with us, let us lie in wait for blood; let us ambush the innocent without reason.” And then he says in verse 15, “my son, do not walk in the way with them; hold back your foot from their paths, for their feet run to evil, and they make haste to shed blood.”

Why does the Proverbs begin like this? Why such an extreme and alarming example? Because it is not uncommon. We saw it last week. And there are far too many situations like this that happen other places every day.

The extreme evils that that people commit are not just random and unexplainable acts. They happen as just one more step along a path they have long been traveling. The father in this text said “do not walk in the way with them; hold back your foot from their paths.” They are walking along a path, and it's leading to this evil and awful end.

This kind of evil happens when people reject reality as God designed it, and so live against the grain of it. They walk down a sinful and delusional path that gets increasingly dark.

And the lesson for each one of us is this: Any time you sin; any time your heart bends away from God's wisdom and ways; you are stepping onto the path that leads to that kind of end. And the lesson is not—don't step on the path, because you could end up there. It is: Why would you step on that path at all? The tragic end exposes the nature of the path. It exposes the nature of sin and foolishness.

This is the insight of our text today—which is Proverbs 4–7.

There are two paths in life—the way of wisdom and the way of folly. The first step on either path may not seem consequential.

But proverbs shows us that paths are trajectories. We take one step in a certain direction, and we keep moving. We go further and further down the path. We gain momentum. And what began as a few seemingly inconsequential steps leads us all the way down the path.

One path leads to you becoming a man or woman of virtue, wisdom, and joy. The other path leads to you becoming a man or woman of evil, folly, and death—but you may not even know. Because part of the problem is that darkness on that path blinds you to reality.

When Jesus calls us to follow him, he is calling us to follow the path of true wisdom.

He said there are only two paths: you receive grace, deny yourself, and follow him; or you *reject* his grace, deny *him*, and follow *yourself*. And there are only two destinations—his narrow path leads to life; the broad path leads to destruction.

Proverbs 4–7 is holding out the path of Jesus as the way of wisdom. The way of Jesus is the way that leads to life, light, and love. The way of foolishness leads to what we saw this week. Every one of us—in every thought, word, or action in our lives—is moving in one of these directions or the other.

This is here to wake us up to the danger of even one step on the path of folly and sin. It is here to give us a vision for how to help to become men and women of consequence—who walk in wisdom, and help others do the same.

Here are two ways to think about Proverbs 4–7, and we need both of them.

1. The first is to read it for yourself. It is framed as instruction from a father to a son. We are each to take the role of the son, and receive this wisdom.
2. The second way is to read it for how you can help others. You are to become like the father in this text. You are to influence others. This gives you a vision for how to change culture by spreading wisdom.

Here are four things we need to walk on the way of wisdom: Receive the wisdom from behind, walk straight on the path ahead, enjoy your spouse at your side, and heed the warnings all around.

1. Receive the Wisdom From Behind (4:1–9)

First, receive the wisdom from behind.

A father has been giving his sons wisdom in the first three chapters. But now he passes on the wisdom he learned from his own father. He is telling his sons: “We have ancient, generational wisdom coming from behind us. I’m passing it on to you now. Receive it and walk in it.”

He says in verses 3–4:

3 When I was a son with my father, tender, the only one in the sight of my mother,
4 he taught me and said to me, “Let your heart hold fast my words; keep my commandments, and live.

And what is this grandfather’s wisdom?

Here's the wisdom he passes on, in verses 5–9:

5 Get wisdom; get insight;
 do not forget, and do not turn away from the words of my mouth.
6 Do not forsake her, and she will keep you;
 love her, and she will guard you.
7 The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom,
 and whatever you get, get insight.
8 Prize her highly, and she will exalt you;
 she will honor you if you embrace her.
9 She will place on your head a graceful garland;
 she will bestow on you a beautiful crown.”

This is actually not anything we have not already seen from the the first chapters. In Proverbs 1–3 the father passes on *his own* wisdom. Now he passes on the wisdom he learned from his own father—and it sounds just like what he’s already said.

What’s the point? Wisdom is supposed to be passed on generationally.

For you who are younger: if you have at least one Christian parent or grandparent—that is a great gift to you. Receive their wisdom for how to live well in the world.

For those of you who are parents or grandparents: what have you learned that you need to pass on? And how will you make sure to share that with your children and grandchildren?

Do you see how intentional this father is? He is sitting down, looking his sons in the eyes, and sharing specific things he was taught. Parents must create these kinds of moments with kids. Regular times to share wisdom for living well.

And especially now in the New Covenant—the church is a new family altogether. And the Bible calls the older to disciple the younger. This is why we prioritize intergenerational relationships.

If you are older in the faith, you need find younger Christians to help follow Jesus. If you are younger in the faith, can befriend older Christians and learn from them. This does not have to be formal mentorship, nor do we need a program to do this. It looks like a church filled with people who take intentional steps to get time together, and who talk and share and learn from one another.

So, this is the first step to walking on the wise path—receive the wisdom from behind.

2. Walk Straight on the Path Ahead (4:10–27)

Second, walk straight on the path ahead. Verses 10–27 use the imagery of two ways, or paths.

The assumption is that the sons are already on the way of wisdom. And then there is a second path that is always open to them on the side—it's the evil and foolish path. The call is to keep walking straight on the way of wisdom, and don't step off into the other path.

Listen to the contrast of these two ways in verses 11–19:

- 11 I have taught you the way of wisdom;
I have led you in the paths of uprightness.
- 12 When you walk, your step will not be hampered,
and if you run, you will not stumble.
- 13 Keep hold of instruction; do not let go;
guard her, for she is your life.
- 14 Do not enter the path of the wicked,
and do not walk in the way of the evil.
- 15 Avoid it; do not go on it;
turn away from it and pass on.
- 16 For they cannot sleep unless they have done wrong;
they are robbed of sleep unless they have made someone stumble.
- 17 For they eat the bread of wickedness
and drink the wine of violence.
- 18 But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn,
which shines brighter and brighter until full day.
- 19 The way of the wicked is like deep darkness;
they do not know over what they stumble.

The image of a path pictures our lives as a series of steps.

With each step we take, we are either on the path of wisdom or folly. Every decision we make, everything we say, everything we do—it all moves us along one path or the other.

Remember, wisdom is about character formation. Really, everything we do is forming our character in one way or another:

- Our decisions every moment form habits, and habits form character.
- And then our character turns around and shapes our decisions.
- These decisions then which reinforce our habits, which further forms our character.
- Every desire that turns into actions created momentum in our hearts in a certain direction.

This is why he describes the path of the wicked like an addiction. Notice verses 16–17:

4:16 For they cannot sleep unless they have done wrong;
they are robbed of sleep unless they have made someone stumble.

4:17 For they eat the bread of wickedness
and drink the wine of violence.”

This is how sin works and why it is foolish.

It starts off enjoyable. We think we will do it just this once. But then the next time the desire is stronger. And it takes us farther than we wanted to go.

So, what started out as just an angry look, next time became angry words.
Then the next time you raised your voice.
Then after a year of this, you started swearing when you got angry.
Then you’re now three years in and you’ve called your spouse the most terrible names.

Or it started as just one click, and a few seconds to glance at that image of a body.
Then the next time it was longer.
And then it was more revealing.
And then the gap of time between looking got smaller.
Then three years down the road you’re addicted.
And ten years down the road you’ve committed adultery.

The man who killed the Ukrainian girl... and the man who killed Charlie Kirk...
...those who celebrated...
They did not wake up and decide to be foolish and wicked on that day.
They were walking down that path for a long time.

John Owen said “sin aims always at the utmost.”ⁱ He meant that sin starts small, but it aims big. It starts with a first down, but it strives for the touchdown. Every lustful thought wants to become adultery. Every angry thought wants to become murder. Every white lie wants to become boldfaced. Every bitter thought against a spouse wants to become divorce.

If you get to the end of the path of adultery or abuse or murder or unjustified divorce—you did not just do that in a moment of weakness. You traveled that path for a long time.

And my favorite image in Proverbs is right here in verses 18–19.

The way of wisdom gets increasingly bright; the way of the wicked gets increasingly dark.

18 But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn,
which shines brighter and brighter until full day.

19 The way of the wicked is like deep darkness;
they do not know over what they stumble.

The further we walk, the further down the road we get. The path of the righteous is like the dawn, and the sun gets higher, and the path gets brighter. The path of the wicked is deep darkness—they are bumping into things but can't see.

Wisdom is simply about embracing reality. It is about seeing reality as God made it, and adjusting to it. The more you walk in wisdom, the clearer and brighter life becomes. You can navigate life clearly; you can cut with the grain of creation.

But if you are on the path of the wicked, you are not embracing reality. You are living against the grain of creation. And so you will be bumping into things and not realize why life isn't working out for you.

I want to read from an insightful article about this last week by Samuel James. He was describing how our culture got to where it is today. Notice how his description maps onto Proverbs.

“There are orientations toward the world—toward nature, toward societies, toward mothers and fathers, toward marriage and children and work and death—that either reject or accept reality. American progressivism, baptized into the religion of the Sexual Revolution and identity politics, rejects reality. It sanctifies the self, and builds little fortresses for unmoored desires.

“Including the desire to eliminate those who disagree...”

He then went on to ask about the solution. Many people will say what they think we need to do. They will say we have to be less mean. We need to be more civilized. Okay, yes. But that's not deep enough. *What do we need?* Here's how James put it:

“The truth is that it's precisely the embarrassment over spirituality and unwillingness to submit to transcendent truths that has turned our civic life so gangrenous. What keeps people from shooting the necks of people they dislike? A commitment to individualism, free speech, or pluralism? No. In the end, it is only the fear of God that preserves the center. In losing God, we are burying ourselves.”ⁱⁱ

Do you hear what he is saying? He is saying what Proverbs is saying. When you reject reality... When you don't see that God designed the world... and when you are not living in line with his creational norms... then life and community and society won't work.

So, this is call to see the path of wisdom as the path of reality, sanity, and God's design.

And in order to walk on this path, you have to get this conviction deep in your heart. Do you see verse 23? "Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life."

You get wisdom deep in your heart, and then you guard it. Why? Because this determines your steps. This determines where you actually go. It is the spring that overflows into your whole life.

And so, in the next verses, we see that from the overflow of the heart, the life lives. Verse 24 focuses on our words. Verse 25 focuses on our eyes. Verse 26 focuses on our feet. What we say, where we look, where we go—it all flows from the heart.

So this concludes in verse 27 with, "do not swerve to the right or to the left; turn your foot away from evil."

So, receive the wisdom from behind, and then walk straight on the path ahead.

3. Enjoy Your Spouse at Your Side (5:1–23)

Now, third, faithfully enjoy the spouse at your side.

This is chapter 5. This father now talks to his sons about when they will be married. And he says the way of wisdom is to faithfully enjoy your wife. To be faithful to her sexually by not being sexually involved with anyone else. And to enjoy her—to let her captivate you.

Now, this father assumes his sons will get married. That, of course, does not always happen. And the New Testament honors a life of singleness used for the sake of making disciples. But nevertheless, getting married is the norm, and so he assumes it.

And he gives a vision for sexuality in marriage here. This shows us that God's wisdom applies to our sexuality. God designed gender and sexuality and marriage. And wisdom is seeing reality as he designed it, learning to love it, and living in line with it.

He first gives a warning against adultery in verses 1–14.

He is helping us see what's really going on with the temptation of adultery. Wisdom is about learning to see through what is in front of us to discern what's really going on.

He describes an adulterous who may tempt his sons. What is obvious about her? That she is beautiful, she is appealing, and she is inviting. This is verse 3, "For the lips of a forbidden woman drip honey, and her speech is smoother than oil." That is true of her in person, and also when she is an image on a screen.

But what is true of reality, but is *not* as obvious? Where her path leads. This is verses 4–6:

- 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 follow the path to Sheol;
6 she does not ponder the path of life;
her ways wander, and she does not know it.

The father helps us think about the steps further down the path. The problem with sin and folly is we don't think of the consequences. We see the temptation, we see the short-term gain, and we forget the consequences. So he uses the image of path to help us see further down the road. One way to fight sin is to remember and remind yourself where it leads.

So, where does sexual immorality or adultery head? He gives the consequences in the next verses. In verse 9, you “give your honor to others.” So you lose your reputation. And in verses 11–14, you are filled with emotional regret.

More consequences today can include getting a divorce, paying child support, splitting income, being lonely. And the most devastating consequences of adultery and divorce are on children. We thank God for how he helps so many kids from broken homes—but the stats don't lie—most of them have a lot of challenges they have to overcome because of it. Divorce is transferring the problems of the parents onto the children. The end of the path of unfaithfulness is bitter.

What is the alternative? The alternative is enjoying your spouse. Being filled with delight.

This is verses 15–20—and notice what a positive, enchanting vision of sexuality this is. When we read through Proverbs as a family—I always say to my sons, “A lot of people will tell you the Bible is just negative about sexuality. Totally wrong. This right here is in the Bible.”

- 15 Drink water from your own cistern,
flowing water from your own well.
16 Should your springs be scattered abroad,
streams of water in the streets?
17 Let them be for yourself alone,
and not for strangers with you.
18 Let your fountain be blessed,
and rejoice in the wife of your youth,
19 a lovely deer, a graceful doe.
Let her breasts fill you at all times with delight;
be intoxicated always in her love.
20 Why should you be intoxicated, my son, with a forbidden woman
and embrace the bosom of an adulteress?

As we step back here, notice this includes both limits and liberation.

We have boundaries; but within those boundaries, we have boundless joy.

Many in our culture have rejected limits and wants liberation alone. This is the sexual revolution. And it is foolish because it completely ignores the consequences. And it is not working.

But Christians should not over-react to this and only focus on the limits. The Bible's message on sexuality is not first a "No." It is a wholehearted "Yes." Many people grew up in a home where they were never told of the beauty of sex. They were never told that it was actually a good gift from God.

But that would be like telling someone fire is bad because of all the forest fires. But fire is mainly good, mainly a gift, mainly beautiful. You just need to keep it in its proper place. All the "no's" are in protection of the good "yes."

Here's how Ray Orlund put it: "[Conservative people love form and restraint and control. Progressive people love freedom and openness and choices. Both see part of the truth, but wisdom see more. Wisdom teaches us that God gives 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.](#)"ⁱⁱⁱ

- One of the great failures in our time is that of married couples to live with sexual integrity—to live with faithful enjoyment of one another.
- The second failure was to not give kids a beautiful, biblical, compelling vision of sexuality. They did not regularly talk to their children like this father does in Proverbs. But kids need this. They need far more than just a one-time birds and bees talk. They need regular, dignified, age-appropriate conversations about this.

So, this is wisdom: if you are married, enjoy your spouse with faithfulness.

4. Heed the Warnings All Around (Prov 6:1–7:27)

More briefly, fourth, heed the warnings all around.

This is chapters 6–7. As we walk on the way of wisdom, we need to be warned about the detours. Warned of the exits. Warned of people or things that lead us to stray.

The first is the unwise lender.

Here's the situation in verse 1–5. Don't take responsibility for the debt of a stranger. Don't co-sign for their loan. Don't partner with someone who may end up sinking you with them. And if you do, get out of it quick.

Second is the lazy sluggard.

This is verses 6–11. He's told to go to the ant to learn some wisdom about diligence. Ants take initiative. Ants work hard. Ants prepare and plan ahead.

The opposite is the sluggard of verses 10–11, which is a favorite in our house.

- 10 A little sleep, a little slumber,
 a little folding of the hands to rest,
11 and poverty will come upon you like a robber,
 and want like an armed man.

We'll see more about this as we move through the rest of Proverbs.

Third, the divisive troublemaker.

This is verses 12–19. This person subtly causes division. The language used here is "sowing discord." And he does it with his words. This is verse 14, "with perverted heart devises evil, continually sowing discord."

And this is the climactic problem of the list of seven things the Lord hates. All of them matter. And the final and climactic one is a person who sows division. He puts wedges between people who were otherwise relationally close. He leads people to no longer trust and enjoy one another.

This is verses 16–19.

- 16 There are six things that the LORD hates,
 seven that are an abomination to him:
17 haughty eyes, a lying tongue,
 and hands that shed innocent blood,
18 a heart that devises wicked plans,
 feet that make haste to run to evil
19 a false witness who breathes out lies,
 and one who sows discord among brothers.

The fourth and final warning is against lust and the adulteress.

Proverbs 6:20–35 make one point: the cost of adultery. Wisdom guards our heart from letting lust take a steps that lead to adultery.

Notice how the warning is about how this begins in the heart. In verse 25, it says, “Do not desire her beauty in your heart, and do not let her capture you with her eyelashes.” In our culture, this also applies to internet images.

The rest of chapter 7 explains the nature of temptation. It’s a powerful example of how sexual temptation draws in and destroys a young person.

But let me draw attention to just a few key moments here:

1. The father tells a story about a young man he saw who was draw away into sexual immorality. He tells the story to warn his sons about this. This is wise parenting. He doesn’t just say, “sons, don’t do it.” He sits down and talks through the dynamics of temptation, and how it’s powerful, and where it leads. This is what so many kids need and never hear from anyone. Parents need to talk to their sons and daughters about this earlier and more often than they think.

Here's how the story begins:

7:6 For at the window of my house
I have looked out through my lattice,
7:7 and I have seen among the simple,
I have perceived among the youths,
a young man lacking sense,
7:8 passing along the street near her corner,
taking the road to her house
7:9 in the twilight, in the evening,
at the time of night and darkness.
7:10 And behold, the woman meets him,
dressed as a prostitute, wily of heart.

2. Then he describes how she appeals to him and overcomes his objections. We are semi-rational at the beginning of temptation. But then we are quickly and easily persuaded. When the heart wants what it wants, it justifies itself to the mind and the mind goes along.
3. And then the moment comes: the young man held out a bit. But then he gives in. And notice it’s at the very moment of giving in to temptation that the tragedy happens.

7:22 All at once he follows her,
as an ox goes to the slaughter,
or as a stag is caught fast
7:23 till an arrow pierces its liver;
as a bird rushes into a snare;
he does not know that it will cost him his life.

This concludes with a warning in verses 25–27:

- 25 Let not your heart turn aside to her ways;
do not stray into her paths,
26 for many a victim has she laid low,
and all her slain are a mighty throng.
27 Her house is the way to Sheol,
going down to the chambers of death.

Conclusion

These are the two paths.

Wisdom is about seeing reality and living in line with it. When we do that, the path gets brighter and clearer. When we don't it gets darker and darker.

Now, as we wrap up, we need to be clear about the beginning and the end of these paths.

What is the *end* of each path?

The end of the path of wisdom is seeing reality clearly, in the midday sun, and living in light of it with joy.

The end of the path of folly is darkness and stumbling and addiction to sin. Why? Because when you reject God's design for human flourishing, you are rejecting your own good. You are trying to cut against the grain and swim against the current.

What is the *beginning* of each path?

The beginning of the path of the wicked is any step you take in that direction. You can walk on the path of wisdom, but the moment you step off, you enter the other path.

But what is the beginning of the way of wisdom? Proverbs 1:7, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge [and wisdom]." This is a reverent trust in the God who creates and saves. It's a sincere trust in Christ—as not just our savior, but our sage.

Jesus was the most sane, reality-embracing, morally straight person who ever lived.

He alone walked the way of wisdom perfectly. And we have all gone astray. We have all followed the path of folly and sin. And Jesus invites us to begin by admitting that we need him. Without him, we are all bound to walk the way of the wicked. And all the evils we saw the past week—in both the violence and its celebration—that is where our hearts would take us. We all have that bent because of sin.

But Jesus invites us to repent and trust him. And he forgives us and renews our mind. He offers us reality.

So, what does it look like to become a Christian or grow as a Christian? The answer is actually the same: It is opening ourselves up with a posture of sincere repentance and faith.

- *Repentance* means to turn around. It means that if we've taken one step, or a thousand steps away, we turn around. And in God's grace, the path of wisdom is always right there. We step on it by simply saying to God, "you were right; I was wrong; Please forgive me."
- And *faith* means we open ourselves up to his wisdom. We acknowledge that he designed this world to work a certain way. And so we open ourselves to his wisdom. And we seek it diligently in his word.
- And from here, we don't just walk in wisdom, we help others do the same. We are called to live like the father in Proverbs—who helps other know wisdom. Don't be silent. Don't be afraid. Be kind, and be clear. Christians do not offer their children, their friends, or the culture a myth or merely personal values. We offer reality in Christ. You can be confident when you speak the truth of God's design and his word.

ⁱ John Owen, *On the Mortification of Sin*, 53.

ⁱⁱ Samuel James, "How Great the Chasm That Lay Between," <https://www.digitalliturgies.net/p/how-great-the-chasm-that-lay-between>

ⁱⁱⁱ Ray Ortlund, Jr. *Marriage and the Mystery of the Gospel*, 65.