

## **Guardrails of Wisdom for the Path of Life (Prov. 22:17–23:35)**

Proverbs: The Wisdom of God as a Way of Life

Zionsville Fellowship | November 30, 2025 | Drew Hunter

How do you explain the widespread popularity of Jordan Peterson, Andrew Tate, and Charlie Kirk?

All three are very different in their values. But they are all doing one thing in common (or were, in the case of Charlie)—they are giving young men clear advice about how to be man. Their advice wildly differs from one another—from biblical wisdom on one end of the spectrum, to folly on the other.

But why are they so popular? Because they are filling the gap that fathers (and mothers) should have filled. Young men need a vision for what their life is supposed to be about, and they didn't receive it from their parents or from church, or from other mentors. So they've found these voices.

Proverbs gives us this vision.

It shows us how Christianity is relevant for all of life. The Christian faith is not just about the forgiveness of sins and Sunday morning services; it is also about living a life of wisdom and purpose in everything we do. And it is not just for our personal lives, but for all of society.

Proverbs shows us that wisdom is a path that we follow. The way of wisdom is not only good for us; it leads us to live in ways that are good for the world. It gives us character and wisdom is to live well in God's world—not only for our own sake, but to honor God and influence society for good.

Our text this morning—Proverbs 22:17 through chapter 23—shows us this path. And it especially focuses on the guardrails that run alongside the path of wisdom.

This section is framed as wisdom for young men starting out in their adult life. It points them in the way of wisdom for their vocation and adult life. And it especially focuses on guardrails to keep them on the path.

Many of us enter adulthood totally unprepared, especially in terms of character. We come face-to-face with opportunities and temptations related justice, wealth, social status, parenting, addictions, friendship. Proverbs gives us the wisdom we need to navigate this well. So many young people need a structure for life, and no one gives it to them. We launch into adulthood totally unprepared for the challenges and opportunities. This is why we need Proverbs today.

Here are a few ways to think about this section:

- Maybe you are a young man or woman preparing for adulthood. These are the urgent guardrails you need right now enter this next phase with wisdom.

- Or maybe you're well on your way through your career. This is a time for you to step back and think about what you need to adjust. How will you live out your next decade or two with wisdom and character?
- Or maybe you are retired, and you have wisdom to pass to the next generation. This text gives you an agenda of what to teach. You can share these guardrails with younger men and women and grandchildren, and give plenty of examples from your own life.
- And kids, you may feel like adulthood is far away; but it's coming. And this is a vision for the kind of life God is preparing you to live.

Here's the plan. First, we'll see the path of vocational character and wisdom. Then we'll see ten guardrails along the path.

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### **The Path of Vocational Character and Wisdom (22:17–21)**

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First, the path of vocational character and wisdom.

Proverbs 22:17–21 introduce the fourth section in Proverbs. We've seen in this series that Proverbs is carefully structured. It's organized as a progressive curriculum for character development. We're now entering the fourth major section.

1. **Beginning Wisdom (Prov. 1–9)**. This consists in encouragements from a father to sons to fear God and seek wisdom.
2. **Elementary Wisdom (Prov. 10–15)**. This gave us a clear portrait of the righteous person, in opposition to the unrighteous person. It was filled with simple contrasts.
3. **Intermediate Wisdom (Prov. 16–22:16)**. Wisdom starts getting more nuanced and complex here. Elementary wisdom gave us the general patterns for how life works; this section gave the exceptions.
4. **Vocational Wisdom (Prov. 22:17–24:34)**. This is a collection of sayings that about wisdom for vocational life. You can see in verse 17 that these are called "the words of the wise." It's a collection of sayings from the wise.

The introduction in verses 17–21 show us what this fourth section is all about. Here are three insights.

First, this shows us the *process* of becoming wise.

This is verses 17–18. Notice this progression in verses 17–18: "Incline your ear, and hear the words of the wise, and apply your heart to my knowledge, for it will be pleasant if you keep them within you, if all of them are ready on your lips." This is the four-step process: listen, internalize, keep, and teach.

1. This process begins with *inclining* our ears to listen. This isn't passive. It is a posture of leaning in, wanting to learn, listening carefully.
2. Then we apply our hearts to this knowledge. We each have to think through how to engage this in our hearts. What needs to change in how we think, what we desire, how we live?
3. Then we "keep" and guard it within us.
4. And then finally, the last stage is that it is "ready on your lips." You are living in such a way that you are ready to give other people wisdom.

This is why we encourage you to talk about sermons with your family and friends. And why many small groups talk them through. And why we each need to make sure we're not just hearers; but doers.

Here's a picture of what this can look like with sermons. John Paton was a missionary in the 1800s. He described how he listened to adults in his church engage with Sunday services and sermons. He said, "They went to church full of beautiful expectancy of spirit—their souls were on the outlook for God; they returned from the church, ready and even anxious to exchange ideas as to what they heard and received of the things of life."<sup>i</sup> This is the process of becoming wise.

Second, the heart of wisdom as trusting God.

Verse 19 says, "that your trust may be in the Lord, I have made them known to you today, even to you." He is making these wise sayings known *that* your trust may be in the Lord.

So the wise sayings here actually lead us to trust God *more*. The more we learn God's wisdom for life, and the more we walk in it, the more we trust him. We see that his ways really *are* wise.

I wonder if you've experienced that even through our series in Proverbs. The more you've seen the wisdom of God in this book, the more you trust him. And as we see his wisdom, we see that it really does conform to reality. And so we trust him all the more.

Many people in our own culture are learning this. Maybe you've heard the term, "reality respecters." These are people who are not yet Christians, but they respect reality. They respect biological reality, or objective truth, or transcendent values. And once many of these people see reality, they learn that God is the source of it. And this leads them to put their trust in him.

Third, this section guides us as we enter into adulthood and our vocations.

He said he wrote these sayings, then verse 21 gives the purpose: "to make you know what is right and true, that you may give a true answer to those who sent you."

That sounds like an odd purpose. He wrote all of this, “that you may give a true answer to those to sent you.” What is this about? This refers to reporting back to someone who sends you in the context of employment. It could be translated “those who commission you.”

This envisions a son who is commissioned by a diplomat, or emissary, or official leader—and that leader is going to be asking for a report back.<sup>ii</sup> This whole section is framed as wisdom to a son who is going to be working for someone important. And this son needs to be the kind of person who is reliable. And, in verse 20, he needs to know what is right and true. He needs to be a man of character.

That’s what this section is all about. Many situations in the rest of Proverbs 22–24 deal with economic, social, and career advancement.<sup>iii</sup> He will be employed by dignitaries. He will be invited to eat with rulers. He will stand before kings. He will face new opportunities and temptations with career and economic advancement.

And this section is especially focused on giving guardrails.

We have the path of wisdom out ahead of us; and we need guardrails to keep us on track. These are the character boundaries we need as we navigate advancement in life.

Now, before we look at these, I want to be clear about one thing. These are mainly a bunch of “don’ts.” These two chapters are filled with “don’ts.” Christians who grasp the gospel can get nervous about this kind of message. The gospel is about God’s grace for those who fail to live up to his standards. We don’t work for our salvation; we receive it by grace alone through faith alone. So, a list of commands—especially don’ts—can feel like legalism.

But this is not legalism; this is wisdom—not to earn our salvation, but to enjoy it and spread God’s goodness in the world.

Here are 10 guardrails along the path of wisdom.

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### **Guardrail 1: Don’t Exploit the Vulnerable (22:22–23; 23:10–11)**

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First, don’t exploit the vulnerable.

This is verses 22–23: “Do not rob the poor, because he is poor, or crush the afflicted at the gate, 23 for the LORD will plead their cause and rob of life those who rob them.”

This is not just saying, “don’t rob poor people.” Notice it says, “or crush the afflicted *at the gate*.” That refers to the city gate where the important leaders met together. It’s where they carried out the economic, social, and political life of the community.<sup>iv</sup>

To crush the afflicted at the gate is to take advantage of them through corruption. Wealthy businessmen could take advantage of the poor who had no power. The afflicted were crushed when they were pressed into bankruptcy and dependence.

And the poor are targeted because they can't fight back. This is why it says, "do not rob the poor *because they are poor.*" The poor are target because they have no power. They can't resist or do anything about it.

And what is the motivation? Verse 23 does not just say it won't work out well for you. It says that God will get personally involved. God will personally take up their case, and he will put the one who oppresses to death.

There's another similar note down in 23:10–11: "Do not move an ancient landmark or enter the fields of the fatherless, 11 for their Redeemer is strong; he will plead their cause against you."

The landmarks were property boundaries. To move a landmark is to steal property. And to enter the fields of an orphan is preying on the vulnerable. The orphan had no social power to do anything about it.

And what is the result? God will plead their case against the perpetrator. God will get personally involved.<sup>v</sup> He will bring judgment—often in this life, and certainly in the next.

Who are the poor, afflicted, and vulnerable today?

This would include many who are in poverty. Many single mothers. Refugees. Orphans in the foster care system. Children in the womb. Children who are embryos and indefinitely frozen through the IVF process. The elderly and disabled who do not have proper care.

All of these can be crushed at the gate—in the places of political and economic power. They can be crushed through personal neglect, and through legislation.

Let's remember especially who this was written for:

It is giving a guardrail for those who are launching into their vocational life. It is a warning to make sure that as you get power, you use it for good. You consider the poor and vulnerable. You do not take advantage of them. You work to ensure they are protected. Ensure the justice is done for them. Use your work to be a blessing to customers, families, and employees. Protect the children in the womb. Don't give lower-wage employees unbearable hours and work conditions.

And in our constitutional republic, we are all part of the voting government. Each voting citizen is making decisions "at the gate." And we need to remember the vulnerable.

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## Guardrail 2: Don't Befriend the Angry (22:24–25)

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The second guardrail is: don't befriend the angry.

Why? Because your friends shape your character. 24 Make no friendship with a man given to anger, nor go with a wrathful man, 25 lest you learn his ways and entangle yourself in a snare. If you become friends with someone given to anger, you will “learn his ways.” You don't learn by taking notes, of course. You simply become like them.

This is the transforming power of friendship. If your friends are angry and critical and have no emotional self-control; you will probably start to become like them.

As someone said, show me your friends, and I'll show you your future. Many people's trajectory is set by the friends they make when they are twenty.

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## Guardrail 3: Don't Chase Wealth (22:26–28; 23:4–5)

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Third, don't chase wealth.

Several of these sayings warn against being foolish with wealth, or gaining it deceptively. Then 23:4–5 calls us to not chase wealth: “Do not toil to acquire wealth; be discerning enough to desist. 5 When your eyes light on it, it is gone, for suddenly it sprouts wings, flying like an eagle toward heaven.”

Proverbs says wealth is good, but you should not *toil* for it or *trust* in it. Work for it, but don't give your whole life for it.

Some of you have learned this the hard way.

You got your first good-paying job, and you were surprised by the paycheck. And then you want more. You start over-working, toiling, striving.

Now you look back and realize you focused way too much on making money. You wanted the bigger house. The better vacations. The larger investments. And you worked and worked. And you have neglected your family. Or neglected your friendships. Or neglected engaging with the local church. Or neglected your relationship with the Lord.

And this is the lesson to learn early: Work is good, and finding financial security can be a blessing. But do not sacrifice other important priorities for that. And don't trust in wealth. Get a balanced life. Don't take the promotion if it means you'll compromise other important values and relationships. Find work that serves people well and provides; and be content.

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**Guardrail 4: Don't Neglect Your Craft (22:29)**

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Fourth, don't neglect your craft.

Proverbs doesn't look down upon social, economic, or political advancement. Success can be a blessing, because it gives you the opportunities to serve others.

So, in 22:29, we see a natural path to success and advancement: "Do you see a man skillful in his work? He will stand before kings; he will not stand before obscure men." This implies that it is a good thing to advance. It motivates us to gain skill in our craft, and the result may be advancement.

We see many people who just get a paycheck to get by. They don't develop their craft. They no longer grow. They plateau and coast. Proverbs upholds the value of good work well done. And this can lead to more opportunities to serve and bless others with our craft.

But then once we advance, we find new challenges and temptations that come with success...

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**Guardrail 5: Don't Gorge at a Ruler's Table (23:1–3)**

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Which leads to the fifth guardrail: don't gorge at a ruler's table.

If you do advance to be brought before leaders—what do you do if you're invited to a meal with him? That's what 23:1–3 envisions: "When you sit down to eat with a ruler, observe carefully what is before you, 2 and put a knife to your throat if you are given to appetite. 3 Do not desire his delicacies, for they are deceptive food."

It could be that the food is deceptive because there are ulterior motives.

Or this situation is an opportunity to show your self control and restraint. The host may be testing you to see you character. He put the best food in front of you. You would be tempted to over-indulge. Proverbs says, "don't over-indulge. Have self-control. If you can't stop eating once you start; don't start."

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**Guardrail 6: Don't Withhold Discipline from Your Children (23:13–14)**

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The sixth guardrail moves toward family life: don't withhold discipline from your children.

Proverbs 23:13–14 says, "Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you strike him with a rod, he will not die. 14 If you strike him with the rod, you will save his soul from Sheol."

Proverbs assumes that when men and women enter adulthood, most will pursue a family. This is the normative vision for life from Genesis 1–2. God called Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply and spread God’s glory by making more image-bearers. The Bible gives us a high view of the value of marriage, children, and parenting. Singleness is also honored—especially in the New Testament for the purpose of making disciples of Jesus.

Proverbs esteems family life, but insists on gaining wisdom for raising children. And part of wisdom is knowing how to faithfully, lovingly, carefully discipline.

Here is a father giving his son wisdom for disciplining a child. So this is generational wisdom: After giving wisdom to a son as he enters adulthood and has children of his own.

And he says to make sure not to neglect corrective discipline. He says this because parent’s can be tempted to neglect this. Many parents neglect this today—and it shows. But children need to be corrected in order to be set on the path of wisdom.

I won’t get into the discussion about the place of physical punishment here, other than to say this: Proverbs charts the way between two extremes: *no* physical discipline, and *harsh* physical discipline. The picture that emerges in Proverbs is of a parent lovingly, patiently, carefully, training, teaching, and correcting children.

It affirms that if we neglect discipline, this is not love: You are letting them walk down the path of foolishness that leads to death. But if you love your child, you will discipline them to guide them on the path of life.

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### **Guardrail 7: Don’t Let Your Heart Envy (23:17–18)**

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Seventh, don’t let your heart envy.

This father is warning his son about the temptation to envy other people. He knows that as we enter adulthood, we can be driven by envy. We become discontent in our jobs... discontent with our finances... discontent with our lives. And we see other people who have more, and we envy them.

So the father says, in verses 17–18, “Let not your heart envy sinners, but continue in the fear of the LORD all the day. 18 Surely there is a future, and your hope will not be cut off.”

The antidote to discontentment and envy is the fear of the Lord. This is the trusting reverence in God. It looks to God as the one who made us, who cares for us, and who provides for us. So we do the right thing, and we leave the results to God.

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**Guardrail 8: Don't Overindulge in Food and Drink (23:19–21, 29–35)**

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Eighth, don't overindulge in food and drink.

Alcoholism and gluttony have long-term consequences for yourself and others.

This is verses 19–21: “Hear, my son, and be wise, and direct your heart in the way. 20 Be not among drunkards or among gluttonous eaters of meat, 21 for the drunkard and the glutton will come to poverty, and slumber will clothe them with rags.”

This is not just describing someone who drinks too much on one single occasion. Or a person who had too much food at thanksgiving. This is describing a pattern of behavior. It's someone who is addicted to alcohol—they drink too much, and they drink too often. And it is someone who is addicted to food—they eat too much, and they eat too often.

In our culture, we tend to rightly see the problems with alcoholism, but not gluttony. But both are included here because they are similar. They both demonstrate a lack of self-control. And, more deeply, they are using alcohol or food as a God-substitute. People often turn to addictions to manage unpleasant emotions. But rather than taking those emotions to God, and learning to deal with them, and even enduring them—we become dependent on a quick-fix. But the problem isn't fixed; it's a temporary relief that leads to longer term problems.

The emphasis here is on the outcome of lethargy, laziness, and poverty. You waste money on alcohol and food and you lose focus so you can't work well.

And the focus here is on being careful to not be too close to people who are like this. Because their problems will become your problems. Of course, we should seek to help and counsel people who are caught in an addiction. But we should not ignore the addictions and join in with them.

And we could add other addictions to this today—pain medication, smoking, viewing explicit images online, and so forth.

Verses 29–35 give us a picture of the particular danger of alcohol. Listen to the description.

29 Who has woe? Who has sorrow? Who has strife? Who has complaining? Who has wounds without cause? Who has redness of eyes? 30 Those who tarry long over wine; those who go to try mixed wine. 31 Do not look at wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup and goes down smoothly. 32 In the end it bites like a serpent and stings like an adder. 33 Your eyes will see strange things, and your heart utter perverse things. 34 You will be like one who lies down in the midst of the sea, like one who lies on the top of a mast. 35 “They struck me,” you will say, “but I was not hurt; they beat me, but I did not feel it. When shall I awake? I must have another drink.”

This is not saying alcohol itself is bad. Psalm 104 says that wine is a gift from God, and he gave it “to gladden the heart of man” (Psalm 104:14).

So, what is the wisdom we need for food, alcohol, and other things we could be addicted to?

1. Know your limit. This is not about enjoying food and alcohol; this is about excess and dependency.
2. Give thanks when you eat or drink. You can only give thanks when it’s not an addiction and a God-substitute in your life. If you are not able to give thanks for what you’re doing, then it’s not honoring to God.
3. Watch your emotions. GK Chesterton put it this way: “Drink because you are happy, but never because you are miserable. Never drink when you are wretched without it... but drink when you would be happy without it.”

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### **Guardrail 9: Don’t Neglect Your Parents (23:22–25)**

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Another temptation as we enter into adulthood and age is neglecting our parents. So, ninth, don’t neglect your parents.

Notice what is unique about verse 22: “Listen to your father who gave you life, and do not despise your mother when she is old.” It is saying, “listen: your parents gave you life, so as they get old, don’t despise them. Keep listening to them. Keep honoring them.”

As we move into adulthood, we get distracted and focused on other things. It can become easy to neglect our parents. And especially in our post-industrial revolution world, we are often geographically separated. This calls us to intentionally honor them. Take care of them when they need it. Don’t neglect them. Keep learning from them.

Verse 25 is the positive goal: “Let your father and mother be glad; let her who bore you rejoice.”

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### **Guardrail 10: Don’t Swerve Into Sexual Sin (23:26–28)**

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Finally, don’t swerve into sexual sin.

We’ve seen this throughout Proverbs—it’s a primary concern of this father for his son. He wants his son to guard his heart and mind and life from temptation. Because many men and women have destroyed their families through giving in to sexual temptation.

This is verses 26–28. Notice how personal the father is here, and how he focuses on the heart. And how he sets himself out ahead of his son as an example: “My son, give me your heart, and let your eyes observe my ways. 27 For a prostitute is a deep pit; an adulteress is a narrow well. 28 She lies in wait like a robber and increases the traitors among mankind.”

That last line is striking—this produces traitors in the world. That is one way to describe the devastating effects of online addictions and relational fallout. It is the breaking of the marriage covenant.

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## Conclusion

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Those are ten guardrails that Proverbs gives us to guard our path.

We can think of them like guardrails on a road. They keep you from driving off into a creek or slamming into a tree.

But as I mentioned, there are reasons why Christians get nervous about lists like this. It’s because we know that mere commands and lists of “don’ts” cannot actually change us. They can’t forgive us when we fail. And they can’t actually change us to do better.

So, we should never focus only on the guardrails. That’s not how you drive a car—you have to know your destination, and look straight ahead. You need to know the guardrails so you don’t swerve off, but you have to mainly look straight ahead.

And the place to look is always Jesus.

We’re on the front-end of Advent.

And so we should ask the question: Why did Jesus come? It wasn’t because he saw how many of us were pulling of the wisdom of Proverbs. It wasn’t to congratulate us for doing so well.

He came because *no one* fulfills this perfectly. We have all sinned and live with foolishness. So many of us can look to this list of nine guardrails and feel the pain of our failures.

But Jesus came at Advent to give us two great gifts: the first is the forgiveness of sins. He lived the perfectly wise and good life, he died in our place, and he rose again. We now come to him acknowledging how we’ve failed, and trusting him for grace. And he gives it freely.

And then the second gift is the Holy Spirit—the Spirit of wisdom. He gives us the Spirit to lead us on this path—not perfectly, but truly. And so we walk this path, and receive the wisdom of these 9 guardrails, with the Spirit’s power.

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<sup>i</sup> John Paton, autobiography, 16.

<sup>ii</sup> Bruce Waltke and De Silva, *Proverbs*, 326, quoting Cody.

<sup>iii</sup> Paul Overland notes that this section gives “character boundaries” to guard as a man begins to pursue a vocation in the world. The goal is to advance and lead for the common good, rather than become angry, lose money through foolishness, be rejected in a high social class setting, dissipate and become poor through gluttony and alcoholism. Overland notes, “focusing on character boundaries and the importance of industry instead of dissipation” (Paul Overland, *Proverbs*, 479)

<sup>iv</sup> Bruce Waltke and De Silva, *Proverbs*, 328.

<sup>v</sup> One of God’s primary concerns in the law was caring for the vulnerable. The vulnerable in Israel were the poor, the fatherless, the widow, and the sojourner. And many times when you read through the laws in Exodus and Deuteronomy it seems very unemotional. If you do this, this is the consequence, and so forth. But when it comes to the vulnerable, God gets personally involved. Listen to Exodus 22: Ex. 22:21 “You shall not wrong a sojourner or oppress him, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt. 22 You shall not mistreat any widow or fatherless child. 23 If you do mistreat them, and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry, 24 and my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children fatherless.”