

CHOOSING LIFE IN A SEX ADDICTED CULTURE

SERIES: CHOOSE WISELY



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Proverbs 5:1–20
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Most of you know, I love ice cream. My family and I recently went on vacation to an all-inclusive resort. What's better than ice cream? All-you-can-eat ice cream. So if it seems like there's a little more of me standing up here this morning, that's the reason.

Imagine a bowl of ice cream. If you don't love ice cream, imagine a bowl of something you do love.

But now imagine this bowl of ice cream (or whatever you love) is laced with arsenic trioxide. If you're not familiar with arsenic trioxide, you should know it is a powerful poison. In the early 19th century, a combination of terrible husbands, bad divorce laws, and easy access to the chemical made it a popular way for disgruntled women to get out of their marriages.

Arsenic trioxide is very effective as a poison. When given in small doses, it leads to a long and usually painful death which is hard to distinguish from other illnesses.

Today, you are not likely to eat ice cream laced with arsenic, but you are very likely to consume a different kind of poison.

In 2009, a study found that the average American consumes 34 Gigabytes of data per day. That's 100,000 words.¹ That was 2009! Another study suggested that in 2015 it might be as high as 74 Gigabytes per day.² That's over twice as much.

We take in an incredible amount of information every day; not unlike my ice cream intake on vacation. The scary part is how much of that information is tainted with a powerful poison.

We're in the middle of a series on the book of Proverbs—an ancient collection of wisdom. Most of the book is framed as a father passing down instructions to his son. Much of that wisdom has to do with sexuality. In the passage we're looking at today, we'll see a father give his son instructions on how to handle the false messages about sexuality that his son might come into contact.

I hope that we will learn some things about handling the false messages about sexuality that we come into contact with. We'll be talking about choosing life in a sex addicted culture.

Imagine a young boy living in a village in the 9th century BC Israel. His family has some land, and maybe a small herd of animals. On market day, when he's old enough, he starts to travel to the city with his father. Walking through the streets, he hears a woman calling out in an unfamiliar way. She's a prostitute.

But his father has thought ahead. His father knows that his son will encounter this scenario, so he prepares him for it. He gives his son some wisdom so that he knows how to understand this new kind of experience.

We are like that young boy, except that we don't only have this experience on the rare trip into town. We live amidst a constant barrage of sexual messages from which we can't escape. From the movies we watch to the books we read to the news to political issues, personal identities, crimes, and our own relationships, we are continually receiving false and misleading messages about sex.

We need help as we encounter these messages. We need the kind of wisdom that this father offers his son.

When I say "we", I mean "we." I don't have this figured out. I grew up thinking that if you just wait until marriage, everything works out okay. But our sexuality is much more complicated than that. Living in our world is much more complicated than that.

Our chapter in Proverbs offers fatherly advice to a young single boy. Not all of us in this room are young nor male nor single, but all of us have something to learn about our sexuality. I'm confident that whether you are young or old, male or female, married or single, you find something helpful in these words.

One of the dangers of studying a book like Proverbs is that it can easily turn into a collection of good advice. John Steinbeck said of advice, "You only want it if it agrees with what you wanted to do anyways."³

You don't come to church to learn how to be a good person, or at least, I hope you don't. We come to worship Jesus out of our deep awareness that we are broken people. We are all a mess. We need forgiveness and redemption and the power of God to work in our lives, not advice.

In short, we need Jesus. We'll be reading about what kinds of decisions we could be making. Ultimately, we want these words to drive us to Jesus. Whether we make good sexual choices or poor sexual choices, it's far more important that all of those choices lead us to the worship of Christ.

In John 14:6, Jesus says, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life."

This statement will help us as we explore Proverbs 5. Each part of the father's advice points to Jesus as the truth, Jesus as the way, and Jesus as the life. I hope we'll learn something about how to live out our sexuality as followers of Jesus. But more than that, I hope we'll worship Jesus more earnestly.

Jesus is the TRUTH

This chapter of Proverbs begins with a plea for this advice to be taken seriously.

Proverbs 5:1-6:

My son, be attentive to my wisdom; incline your ear to my understanding, 2 that you may keep discretion, and your lips may guard knowledge. 3 For the lips of a forbidden woman drip honey, and her speech is smoother than oil, 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 has lived a little. He can see what is happening on the surface and recognize what is going on. His son doesn't have the same perspective. All he can see is the surface. He can't know what lies beneath.

So the father explains in two main ways. Let's look deeper at verse 3 and 4:

the lips of a forbidden woman drip honey, and her speech is smoother than oil, 4 but in the end she is bitter as wormwood, sharp as a two-edged sword.

The promise is for pleasure and ease. The reality is bitterness and destruction.

Our culture floods us with false promises about sexuality. I'm convinced this is why people are more confused about sexuality, and there is more sexual brokenness in dozens of forms all around us.

Think about this analogy. In 1990, around 10% of Americans were obese. In 2016, that figure jumped to around 30%.⁴ What happened in those 26 years?

Have Americans' ability to control themselves gotten that much worse? Has our character and self-control diminished that much? Or has the context we live in changed?

We're surrounded by addictive foods, marketing to children, and expectations of excess. Our lifestyles are different. Our jobs have transformed. There are a hundred factors, but at least one of them is that our culture has changed so that it has gotten harder to eat well in the past 26 years.

The same is true in our culture. We are surrounded by so many factors which make it difficult to have a healthy understanding of our sexuality. Our context makes it difficult to live well, but recognizing how that's true can help.

The woman in Proverbs offers honey and oil. Our culture promises us sexual freedom as our highest possible goal—freedom to determine your sexual partner, your sexual experience, your individual sexuality, and everything else about sex. As long as no one gets hurt, I need to be free to express myself however I want.

I've been reading an excellent book called *Divine Sex* as I've been preparing for this message. You can find a link to the book in the sermon page on our website. The author Jonathan Grant says this, "Our culture's romantic idealism encourages us to boldly explore the boundless playground of sex and relationships." But he concludes that the promise is empty. "Our cultural experiment has left a trail of relational wreckage, and it has left us in a state of denial about where we stand."⁵

Maybe you don't believe him. Maybe you don't believe me. Look around. Are people happy? Are people finding intimacy and connectedness and self-worth and peace through their sexual freedom? Read the articles. Everyone is a mess, included us.

The great promise of our culture is sexual freedom, but the great delivery had been sexual bondage. We are less free than ever before.

The father in Proverbs says that the woman is promising something she can't deliver. This is the same problem with most of the sexual messages in our own culture. Whether it's pornography or adultery or sexual fantasy or experimentation or anything else, all of these things offer false promises. We have to learn to recognize those lies and reject false promises.

You are told that sex is about you—your experience, your fulfillment. This lie is like arsenic: slowly killing you the more you take it in. It poisons you in your marriage, in your single life, as a young person, and when you're old.

There are dozens of ways this simple lie destroys you, but one of the most powerful is through online pornography. Some estimates say online pornography accounts for 30% of overall traffic on the internet.⁶

Four years ago, the Barna Group conducted a study that concluded almost 80% of men and women aged 18-30 watch online pornography at least once per month. That was four years ago. The statistics weren't significantly different among Christians either. Today, 40% of Americans say that watching pornography isn't wrong.

At the same time, online pornography, like any drug, is becoming more extreme. A 2010 study claimed that almost 90% of pornographic scenes contain physical aggression.⁷ A February 2018 headline in Esquire Magazine read, "Incest is the Fastest Growing Trend in Porn."⁸

This situation is one of the stunning contradictions in our culture. The MeToo movement has been highlighting and exposing aggression against women. At the same time, people are more and accepting of pornography, even though it is increasingly violent, aggressive, and demeaning to women.

Online pornography is the loudest voice of the forbidden woman calling in our streets. She isn't just calling to young boys. She's calling out to boys and girls, men and women, single and married. But pornography offers a lie. It's fun at first, but in the end, there is only bitterness and destruction.

Even if you don't watch pornography, I'll bet you believe some of the lies from our world. Even if you've

never been unfaithful to your spouse. You live in this world. You hear these messages. It's so easy to be lured into believing that sex is about us.

I know this is true for me. I believe some of those lies. I constantly need to remind myself they are false.

But Jesus says, "I am the TRUTH."

We don't just reject the false promises; we follow the truth. We follow Jesus. He speaks to us in the words of Scripture. He guides us through community when our friends remind us of what's really true. He offers us forgiveness when we fall into believing the lies. He heals our hearts as we worship him and refocus ourselves on him. Jesus gives us a reset. He helps us to have a real picture of how real relationships work out in practice.

Jesus is the TRUTH.

Jesus is The Way

Last week during Andy Burnham's sermon on drunkenness, he made the observation that you can't see the end of the road from the beginning of the road. That's the second part of the father's advice.

Proverbs 5:7-14:

And now, O sons, listen to me, and do not depart from the words of my mouth. 8 Keep your way far from her, and do not go near the door of her house, 9 lest you give your honor to others and your years to the merciless, 10 lest strangers take their fill of your strength, and your labors go to the house of a foreigner, 11 and at the end of your life you groan, when your flesh and body are consumed, 12 and you say, "How I hated discipline, and my heart despised reproof! 13 I did not listen to the voice of my teachers or incline my ear to my instructors. I am at the brink of utter ruin in the assembled congregation."

Not only are the sexual promises false, but they start down a path which ends in a destination no one wants to arrive at. Let's focus on verse 9 as a description of where these choices lead.

lest you give your honor to others and your years to the merciless,

Here's the point the father is making: if you walk down this road, you will lose something you don't want

to lose. You will be giving away something invaluable in order to gain something cheap.

I struggled with watching pornography for many years. It started in high school, continued through college, and even lasted a few years into my marriage. I felt trapped by my own sin. I experienced what the father describes here: moments of excitement and pleasure, followed by an avalanche of shame and loneliness.

God has helped me to break that addiction. But it's like layers of an onion. You learn one thing and realize how much more you have to grow. I have so much growth left and so many lies to unlearn.

The father is trying to get the son to look at the long-term consequences of his actions. To see where the road he is tempted to take ends up.

Imagine yourself looking back on your life. What do you want to be able to say about the way you lived and the choices you made? Can you tell where those choices might end up? It's not really a mystery. Who do you know who is happy and fulfilled by their regular use of pornography? Who looks back over a life and celebrates their infidelity and sexual freedom instead of their intimacy and deep relationships?

The father imagines someone looking back on those choices and puts these words into his mouth,

I am at the brink of utter ruin in the assembled congregation.

Think about the path you are on. Our culture offers sexual choices which are based on lies. But they also lead places we don't want to go.

One of the lies of our culture is that there are no consequences. What I do in my own time with my own body doesn't affect anyone else. I can handle it. I can manage it.

Here's where this gets real. A lot of people in this room are making choices right now that are on a road leading to that kind of ruin. Those choices haven't ruined your life yet; it's manageable for now, but that is part of the lie. The wisdom of Proverbs helps us to see the end of the road from where we are.

I know a lot of people who watch pornography think it's not a big deal; that everything else is going okay, there's just this little side habit that I can't seem to kick. But other than that: my spiritual life, my social life, my

marriage or my friends or whatever is great.

That's a lie. We don't work that way. If you're engaging in sexual sin, you are on a road that leads to utter ruin. We are formed by our choices. We are shaped by our habits.

While my family was on vacation, we had the incredible privilege of learning to scuba dive. It was amazing - something that has been on my bucket list for a long time. But you start by getting all the gear on and learning how to scuba dive in a 10-foot deep swimming pool. Our instructor explained why: in a panic, you do what you've learned to do by habit.

So you build habits that form the decisions you make in life. You may think that the kinds of sexual habits you develop by yourself don't affect your relationships, but that isn't true. We are whole beings. You will treat other people in accordance with the habits you've watched and learned.

The path of sexual sin leads to a terrible place. But there is good news. You don't have to stay on the path. No matter where you are on that road—believing lies, watching pornography, having an affair, paying for sex—you can always step off the path.

Once again, the words of Jesus come to mind. Jesus says, "I am the WAY." Jesus offers another path.

The path of sexual sin is a difficult road. If you're addicted or you've been hiding or lying, it is not easy to step off that path. It requires courage and faith. There is no easy fix. You will have to face the consequences of your choices, but the way of Jesus offers forgiveness and redemption and healing.

It is difficult to step off the path you might be on, but it is far better than the utter ruin which awaits you at the end of the path. Jesus asks for the hard work of faith and humility and offers a beautiful destination at the end. Sexual sin promises pleasure and gratification but only leads to ruin.

Choose the way of Jesus. Get off the path of death. Keep your way far from her, and do not go near the door of her house.

Jesus is the LIFE

So far, the words of this Proverb have been words of warning. We have been given a vision of false promises and the kind of destination we don't want to arrive at.

It's critical to acknowledge dangers, but sometimes the church can spend all of its time talking about what we shouldn't do and never getting around to a vision of how we ought to live life.

When we think that way, it's easy to conclude that sex is only dangerous or off-limits or shameful. But I'm glad this Proverb counters that notion. The father's speech to his son doesn't end with warnings. He wants his son to understand the deep pleasure, intimate connection, and gentle growth that real, healthy sexual intimacy with your spouse can offer.

Read how he concludes his speech.

Proverbs 5:15-20:

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?

His words are a beautiful promise of what is available in a healthy sexual relationship. Now he isn't talking about what his son shouldn't do, but what he should do. Let's focus in on verse 18.

Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth,

God wants good things for us. Do you believe that? Do you really believe that?

God designed for us to experience the fullness of a rich life, and that includes our sexuality. The warning against cheap sexual experiences is so that we can enjoy the rich, full intimacy that he intended for us in our sexuality.

Again from the book *Divine Sex*, the author references a survey in which the vast majority of people who grew up in the church said the only thing they were taught about sex is "wait until you're married." For most people, this is the sum total of Christian teaching about sex.

That is a tragedy. How are we to counter the barrage of lies from our culture if our only response is to say "wait"? We need a compelling vision of healthy sexuality over the long term between a man and woman committed to each other through all of the ups and downs of the covenant of marriage.

This is the final part of the father's advice: enjoy the provision God has given you.

There is such a vision. And it is breathtakingly beautiful. It is not glamorous or perfect or anything like what picture of sex that our world offers. It is awkward and intimate and passionate and disappointing and frustrating and joyful and patient all at the same time. It is real. That's what intimacy looks like.

But there is another side to all of this. Some of you are seeing the phrase "rejoice in the wife of your youth" and saying that it doesn't apply to you. What if I'm not married? What if I'm not even dating anyone? What if I'm sixteen years old and marriage seems really far away? Or what if I'm divorced? Or widowed? Or my spouse can't have sex for some reason?

Now we face another one of our culture's lies that makes it so hard for us to actually enjoy God's provision. We are told over and over again in a hundred different ways that you can't be happy without sex. We absorb the message that sexual activity is critical for personal fulfillment—you can't be a whole person if you're not sexually active.

Listen carefully: sex is meant to be enjoyed, but sex is not critical for enjoying life. Sex leads to deep intimacy with another person, but sex is not the only kind of intimacy between people.

You don't need sex to be happy. This message flies against everything our culture teaches us. You don't need sex to be happy. Enjoy God's provision, whatever that provision is.

This message was just as radical in the first century. In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul says that he wishes more people could experience the unique privilege of singleness that he enjoys. Jesus himself lived the fullest example of human existence without any sexual relationships. Roman society was built around the family. Honoring singleness was radically counter-cultural.

You don't need sex to be happy.

And so the Christian vision of living out our sexuality doesn't actually depend on being sexually active. We are given unique gifts during different seasons of life. Everyone has seasons of celibacy. Some have seasons of sexual activity in marriage. But throughout all of those seasons, we can become whole people and live out who God created us to be.

Part of the reason we can do that is that our lives are not just lived in the present. We have a future hope. Everything we experience here points us to the completion of our redeemed life in Christ. All of us have a wedding to look forward to. All of us: young and old, male and female, married, single, divorced and widowed are part of the bride of Christ. Our story ends with a wedding.

Listen to how Jonathan Grant states it:

This wedding party, a joyous celebration of all who are in Christ, is the fruition that we look for in the age to come, and it shines a very real spotlight on the ultimate horizon for our lives. This is a breathtaking vision that—if we can grasp it—can bear the weight of our present frustrations, disappointments, betrayals, and losses.

Jesus says, "I am the Life."

Following Jesus leads to the life that God has for us. Ultimately, he is God's provision. His is the path to life. It's not an easy path. The life Jesus offers often comes on the other side of suffering. That's the message of the Gospel. Real life comes through death. Sacrifice leads to fulfillment.

But there is life on the path Jesus invites us on. There is life for our sexual desires. Jesus is the life.

Conclusion

Let's think back to the bowl of poisoned ice cream. Are you eating it? How much of our world's messages about sexuality are you taking in on a daily basis? Can you feel the poison slowly killing you?

We live in a difficult time in the world. We consume so many stories and messages and affirmations that simply aren't true. We need, more than ever, to hear the words of our wise father instructing us in the ways of life. We need to hear the warnings of how easily sex can go

astray. We need to hear the true and beautiful promise of how fulfilled we can be with God's provision - whatever that may be.

Reject the false promises around you. Remind each other of their emptiness. Protect your children and encourage your friends.

Consider the path that your choices are leading you down. Nothing stays simple. Any sexual sin gets more and more complicated. It might be manageable now. Great. Get off the road before you do some permanent damage. It will become unmanageable, so don't wait until it's too late.

Finally, enjoy the provision that God has given you, in whatever season you are in. If you're married, be intimate with your spouse. Work through any problems which make that difficult. If you're single, appreciate the intimacy and connection you have in other ways. God is good, and he wants good for you.

All of this leads us to Jesus. In a world of lies, he is the truth. Among many false paths, he is the way. And in a world of pain and disappointment, only he offers life. May we all follow him and live.

Endnotes

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- 2 Julie Riggot, "Americans consume media in a major way, study finds," *USCNews*, October 30, 2013, <https://news.usc.edu/56894/americans-consume-media-in-a-major-way-study-finds/>
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- 4 "US Obesity Levels by State," *ProCon*, <https://obesity.procon.org/us-obesity-levels-by-state/>
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- 9 *Ibid.*, Grant.