

Dr. Daniel J. Treier, Proverbs, Session 1, Two Ways

© 2024 Daniel Treier and Ted Hildebrandt

This is Dr. Daniel J. Treier in his teaching on Proverbs for Christian Living. This is session number one, Proverbs 1-9, The Two Ways.

Hi, I'm Dan Trier. I'm the Nodler Professor of Theology at Wheaton College and its graduate school. It's my pleasure to give a series of lectures on the book Proverbs. My own title for them, as you'll see on the screen soon, is Reading Proverbs for Christian Living.

I'm thankful to the Baker Publishing Group for the opportunity to reuse material from this volume that I published on Proverbs and Ecclesiastes in 2011 for a series called the Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible. Now, many faithful Old Testament scholars could produce a more technically competent and comprehensive biblical theology of Proverbs than I could as a systematic theologian. So, I depend heavily in the work I've done on exegetical help from the fine commentaries of people like Tremper Longman and Bruce Waltke and many other evangelical Old Testament scholars whose technical competence in Hebrew and a whole host of other matters far exceeds mine.

In these lectures, I'm not going to try to duplicate the intricate work that they have done. As a systematic theologian, I can really only synthesize and supplement their work with a particular focus. How should Christian believers read Proverbs in light of the entire canon of Christian scripture and our devotion to the triune God revealed in Jesus Christ? Should we simply treat Proverbs as collected nuggets of practical wisdom, sometimes borrowed from or aligning with various cultures? Or should we more pointedly understand our reading in terms of moral formation, learning to serve the Creator God of the people of Israel? Or could Proverbs even further contribute to our spiritual formation within the Christian Church, a human community that is being renewed through following the ultimately faithful Israelite, Jesus Christ? Could engaging Proverbs in that Christian way still respect its original meaning? I think so, and we're going to try to explore that in these lectures.

The following lectures will lay out a four-part answer to these sorts of questions. First, the lengthy introduction in Proverbs 1 through 9 highlights the theme of two ways, an ongoing drama of decision, big picture, and decisions, smaller pictures, between pursuing wisdom on the one hand and practicing folly on the other. That'll be our focus in this lecture.

Second, the short Proverbs in Proverbs 10 through 29 portray virtuous character, a depiction that we can summarize in terms of the Christian tradition's cardinal and theological virtues. Third, by contrast, the short Proverbs in Proverbs 10 through 29

also portray capital vices that wise people overcome, the dangers of the so-called seven deadly sins. Fourth, the final words in Proverbs 30 and 31 connect the book's parental pedagogy with God's pedagogy, promoting the covenant people's formation in wisdom.

This pedagogical focus highlights an additional theme that we'll study in that fourth lecture. Proverbs prioritizes listening and speaking as vital expressions of our character and crucial contributions to its healthy development. Now, on to the basic framework for approaching Proverbs, the two ways set forth in Proverbs 1 through 9. Roland Murphy has suggested that the history of interpretation of Proverbs involves what he calls benign neglect, with Proverbs serving as little more than an enforcer for moral guidance.

After all, few classical commentaries survive, with the intriguing exception of Philip Melancthon's various volumes from the 16th century, and contemporary scholars often prioritize the Torah when it comes to Israel's ethics. Even modern commentaries on Proverbs were relatively few until recent decades. Yet despite the grain of truth in these claims about its neglect, Proverbs has influenced Christian thought from the beginning.

Notably, the Didache, the so-called teaching of the twelve apostles, provides churchly instruction from as early as the second century, possibly even the first. This manual begins as follows, quote, there are two ways, one of life and one of death, and there is a great difference between these two ways, end quote. The ensuing instruction in the Didache is character-driven, resonating with Proverbs and broader Old Testament patterns regarding the two ways.

For instance, Psalm 1 contrasts the way of the righteous with the way of the wicked. Jeremiah 21.8 juxtaposes the way of life and the way of death. The blessings and curses structure in Deuteronomy, for example, in chapter 11, verses 26 through 28, is likewise binary.

Jesus contrasts the broad path to destruction with the narrow path to life in Matthew 7, 13, and 14, so that his followers dubbed their movement the way, according to the book of Acts. Bridging toward the Didache, Galatians 5, 17 through 25 presents a duality of spirit versus flesh. Flesh not referring to the body as if it is inherently evil, but dealing with weak, earthbound, sinful existence in the body.

And in this duality of spirit versus flesh, we have a catalog of virtues and vices. We have an eschatological incentive with God's in-breaking future of judgment and salvation shaping the incentive for Christian life right now. After the Didache picks up on these biblical themes, Boethius' Consolation of Philosophy a few centuries later provides another instance of broad Christian parallels to this biblical two ways

tradition, while Boethius also ponders some of the theological and philosophical questions it raises.

We shouldn't let the eventual development of more conceptual doctrines or problematic debates over natural theology mislead us. We need a theology of created nature. In Proverbs, we find biblical authorization for God's covenant people to engage created nature and pagan cultures wisely, without always needing to refer explicitly to redemptive grace.

Without learning from Proverbs, when we seek to recover the goodness of creation within the Christian worldview, we may fail to integrate cultural engagement with the biblical gospel. Or we may fall into appropriating Proverbs occasionally and haphazardly with moralistic pragmatism as a source of parenting tips or other divinely guaranteed self-help. When Proverbs' theological framework thus becomes distorted or neglected, either God blesses automatically the people who do the right things, or else the God of moralistic therapeutic deism that Christian Smith has described is running so rampant in our culture, even evangelical culture.

This God of moralistic therapeutic deism who blesses people who are nice offers platitudes for people helping themselves. When Proverbs is read that way, we get it deeply wrong and we miss out on the wisdom that God has for us. As we now turn toward the text itself, we will certainly find a moral focus and we will find practical wisdom.

But really at stake are two ways of living that shape long-term communal character rather than providing short-term individual guarantees. The very structure of Proverbs 1.1-9.18 promotes moving forward on the path toward wisdom. Proverbs 1-9 consists of extended speeches from parents and from wisdom personified, while the rest of the book collects proverbs of the shorter, more familiar, usually two-line variety.

Within Proverbs 1-9, the structure of the speeches is, I think, relatively clear. Interludes have wisdom speaking personally in chapter 1 verses 20-33 and chapter 8 verses 1-36. In between those speeches from wisdom personally, lectures from parents address my child or children with that phrase coming in a whole host of verses, 2-1, 3-1, 3-11, 3-21, again in 4-1, 10-20, in chapter 5 verse 1 and verse 7, chapter 6 verses 1, 3 and 20, chapter 7 verses 1 and 24, and then again in chapter 8 verse 32.

Not all of these forms of direct address or evocatives are necessarily equal in force, as if they indicate big-picture structural divisions, but they do establish a broad pattern that I think allows us to read Proverbs 2-9 thematically using the standard chapter divisions. Proverbs 2, 3, 4, and 6 are parental speeches praising wisdom, and they progress in their focus from accepting her offer in chapter 2 to holding on to her

in chapter 3, to maintaining a commitment to this parental path in chapter 4, to avoiding various entanglements in chapter 6. In between, Proverbs 5 and 7 intersperse parental warnings against folly. The signal danger from which a person needs to guard their heart as the end of chapter 4 focuses on is adultery, chapter 5. Married or not, young people face grave spiritual dangers from listening to seductive voices, chapter 7, instead of lady wisdom who speaks in Proverbs 8. Proverbs 9 offers summary versions of the opposing invitations from lady wisdom in verses 1-6 and dame folly in verses 13-18, thus framing axioms about the single-mindedness that is necessary for pursuing wisdom in verses 7-12.

Now of course this dramatic movement that I'm suggesting in the pursuit of wisdom in chapters 1-9 transpires at a very broad, overarching level within which there are many highways and byways. The twists and turns of those numerous subplots in the chapters, though, are usually variations on the basic theme of two ways, one leading to life and the other to death. To the prologue.

Proverbs 1-1 associates the subsequent material with King Solomon. Surely not the author of each proverb, he nevertheless is the hub of their creation and collection. As son of David and king of Israel, Solomon connects these proverbs to Israel's salvation history, however obliquely.

That connection becomes more overt within a few verses where the fear of Yahweh, the fear of the Lord, not just any God or most perfect being, but the fear of the covenant God of Israel, stands as the narrow gate for entering into the pursuit of wisdom. Chapter 1 verse 7. Solomon's name associates him with peace, as Hippolytus from the early church points out. Not just in the negative sense of avoiding war, but rather in the holistic sense of flourishing, enjoying harmony with God, God's people, and the rest of creation.

The wisdom for this shalom is mediated through Israel's officials, from whom ultimately Jesus the Messiah will trace his line. The purpose of the proverbs appears in chapter 1 verses 2-6, heaping repeated words for wisdom on top of each other, and in the process conveying several theological lessons. First, wisdom is not merely personal but also social.

The insight gained from proverbial instruction enables wise dealing and promotes justice, verse 3. The proverbs enable not only learning or gaining instruction but also teaching others, verse 4. Proverbs 1-4 further pushes wisdom into the hurly-burly of interpreting everyday life, since the connotations of its shrewdness vocabulary are not uniformly positive throughout the Old Testament. They recall the serpent in Genesis 3. We need to become wise as serpents, not just innocent as doves, Jesus tells us in Matthew 10, verse 16. Thus, proverbs may sometimes describe the way of the world without always approving how the world is working or prescribing a particular response.

This hermeneutical function of wisdom, helping us to understand what's happening, appears further in verses 5 and 6. Wisdom builds on itself. Learning and teaching wisdom are foundational for growing in the ability to hear and discern its meaning. Wisdom's riches are inexhaustible.

The wise are to increase in skill for understanding these words, which are profound enough to address the ever-changing context of life in human society. Second, biblical wisdom is democratic, addressing everyone where they are. Wisdom's universal invitation is initially evident from the lack of an explicit addressee in chapter 1, verse 1. Next, wisdom accumulates.

One never gets wise enough to stop needing more. Yet at the same time, we can teach wisdom to the simple and the young. Thus, proverbs does not trouble itself over what philosophers call virtue's paradox, the idea that only the virtuous can grow in virtue, but how can someone who lacks virtue ever get started? Wisdom for the next step, even for the first step on the path to life, is always available from God, unless a person has walked so far down the road from simplicity toward prideful folly that he or she utterly refuses to turn back around.

Third, Proverbs 1.7 establishes that wisdom, then, is theologically rooted. Beginning with the fear of the Lord, wisdom is a gift from God. Here, God's name is Yahweh, by which the Creator reveals himself in covenant with Israel.

The givenness of Yahweh's revelation is taken for granted, and chapter 1, verse 7, depicts the either/or. People either respond appropriately with fear toward this God, or else inappropriately with folly. Fools are prideful, a root, if not the root, of the so-called deadly sins, as we'll talk about more.

Fools are prideful, they despise discipline, and they expect no consequences from God. Another early indicator of the need for grace here is the aura of mystery involved in the very idea of a proverb, *mashal*, which can also designate a parable. The two-fold reality of Jesus' parabolic teaching runs parallel to Proverbs.

On one hand, the concrete earthiness of the sayings enables some understanding for even the simplest audience, inserting the teaching into ordinary life. If you think of some contemporary proverbs, such as a penny saved is a penny earned, a stitch in time saves nine, or, more recently, just do it, and others like that, perhaps you will recognize that they are most successful when they are short, poetic, and concrete, so as to be memorable while offering generalizations rather than guarantees. They help to diagnose situations to which they apply, but they can't be applied woodenly if they are to be applied wisely.

Thus, on the other hand, as Jesus put it with respect to the parables, to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance, but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away, Matthew 13, 12. For seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand. In Matthew 13, Jesus goes on to quote Isaiah 6, 9, and 10.

Proverbs and parables seem deceptively simple, yet they have layers of meaning reserved for those who are wise enough to fear God. And as an aside, it may be sobering for us to realize that the biggest source of proverbs in our contemporary culture is Madison Avenue. Food for thought regarding our character formation.

Now the fear of the Lord here is not terror that creates further distance. Instead, this Old Testament synonym for faith, roughly speaking, emphasizes the initial recognition that God is the creator to whom we must account for ourselves. The ancient theologian Bede distinguishes servile fear from holy fear.

Upon initial torment over our sin, God's perfect love casts out servile fear of punishment, 1 John 4, 18, so that charity can instill in us the holy fear of disappointing our beloved Father. Therefore, James 1, 5-8, glosses for us how this fear of God enables us to acquire wisdom. If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you.

But ask in faith, never doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For the doubter, being double-minded and unstable in every way, must not expect to receive anything from the Lord. The basic duality of the two ways not only distinguishes between the wise and the foolish, but it also snakes through the hearts of the wise, who must not become double-minded, asking God for wisdom with little intention of following it.

However bizarre it seems; this is a gift that people sometimes receive without opening. The duality involved in the two ways in this theological dimension of wisdom is not unbiblical dualism. Rather, the two ways stem precisely from the fact that there is only one true God.

All of life, for everyone, is subject to the Lordship of Yahweh, the Creator. For body and soul, for now, and not yet, for the community of believers and the world, all of it is subject to the Lordship of the Creator. Unbiblical dualism splits these realities into utterly separate categories in which one or the other gains priority.

But rejecting dualism of that kind does not obliterate legitimate distinctions. These are provided by Proverbs to direct us in the single-minded pursuit of God's wisdom. Someday God's judgment will distinguish between those who confess God's Lordship willingly and those who do so unwillingly.

Although God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, John 3.16, He did so that the world might be saved through Him, verse 17, not simply left as it is, hiding in the darkness, verses 19-21. Or another anti-dualism passage, 1 Timothy 4, everything God created is good, the start of verse 4. It's to be received with thanksgiving, sanctified by God's Word and by prayer, verses 4 and 5. Although that's true, the direction of the human heart is no longer good, but it turns these gifts into idols. It refuses to have created goods sanctified by God's Word and prayer.

Thanks to the flesh and the devil, apart from the light of Jesus Christ, we forget that the world and its desire are passing away, but those who do the will of God live forever, 1 John 2.17. So, the two ways material in Proverbs, the frequent antithetical form of the Proverbs and so on, are not reinforcing the wrong kind of dualism, they are precisely counteracting it by submitting all of life to the gracious Lordship of the God whom we are to fear. Fourth, then, the corollary of wisdom's social, democratic, and theological dimensions has already been surfacing. Wisdom is progressive.

The teacher actively moves from providing basic discipline to stimulating more complex discernment, as young people overcome their simplicity and grow in wisdom as they walk on a path. The goal is not a slavish repetition of traditional formulae, but the freedom of a maturing person who increasingly learns to recognize truth and live accordingly, without constant direction. The growth necessary to realize that goal of adulthood, though, requires initial instruction and ongoing guidance.

Even the mature wise person needs a multitude of counselors and needs to continue learning by listening. This progressive element of wisdom will be dramatized throughout the following chapters. So, when we come to verses 8-19 in the first chapter, then, we come to the theme of hearing no evil.

These verses are held together and tied to earlier verses with the theme of instruction, among others. The text presents two speakers offering two different paths leading toward two different ends. The speakers are parents, verses 8 and 9, and sinners, verses 10-19.

The sinners are enticing and violent for the sake of greed. Yet their end is death, portrayed starkly in terms of self-destruction in verses 18 and 19, as well as with a double entendre involving the word evil in verse 16. The implication is that the end of parental instruction is life.

While it is tempting to view the references to blood in verses 11 and 15 as extreme, so that the robbers would be outliers from the community, the reference to houses in verse 13 indicates some social status. And verse 19 broadens the field of vision. Such is the end of all who are greedy for gain.

The robbers enact an extreme form of the corrupted desire that infiltrates everyone, and sinners offer enticing forms of alternative community, verse 14, the gang. Given our human relationality, the antidote to the gang is honoring our own parents. Not just grudgingly obeying direct commands until reaching a certain age of independence, but seeking to prize a spiritual heritage we receive from them.

While hearing does not guarantee doing, they are deeply connected. Put negatively, then, bad company corrupts good character, 1 Corinthians 15.33. Put positively, biblical teaching has a personal and oral character that's vital to preserve even within today's image-dominated society that we hear so much about. Parental wisdom, then, addresses the youthful will through authority and loving concern, seeking to elicit maturing deliberation about the consequences of possible actions.

Hearing wisdom's offer verses 20 through 33. This personal character of biblical teaching manifests a new dimension, beginning in verse 20, as wisdom, personified, cries out in the public square. She begins to issue her invitation here and then expands it starting in chapter 8 and verse 1. In these sections, I think it can be shown by way of summary that wisdom is publicly available, personally active, and already scorned.

Proverbs takes a different emphasis than Job 28. Whereas Job 28 emphasizes that wisdom is not a creaturely given, it's not just there for the taking, it's hard to find, Proverbs is celebrating a similar fear of the Lord, but with a different emphasis. God makes wisdom available, not at first sight, but upon hearing the divine voice and hearing the divine teaching through parents.

So, wisdom is very publicly available, and that's part of what the personification of wisdom emphasizes. Second, wisdom is personally active. In Proverbs 1, wisdom is crying out, promising to pour out thoughts and words, calling, experiencing refusal, and therefore laughing and mocking, choosing not to respond or to give herself.

Exactly how this personal portrayal of wisdom relates to the parents on the one hand, the teaching of the book of Proverbs, and maybe to God himself, as Christians ultimately discern, revealed in Jesus Christ, the personification of wisdom is tricky, and we may be able to talk more about it later, but there certainly is an emphasis on the personal activity of wisdom as in some way reflective of and mediating the personal activity of God toward his creation. But thirdly, wisdom is already scorned. Its refusal is treated as a fact in verses 24 and 25 and 29 and 30.

The structure of this language is reminiscent of the personal rejection that evokes God's jealousy, even of the covenant curses forecast for Israel in Deuteronomy. So the young fools here are not necessarily outside the community, they are the next generation of God's covenant people who always begin their journey tempted by

waywardness. Proverbs is quite realistic about how its moral material might be received.

In Proverbs 2, the speaking part switches back from personified wisdom to the parent, but the message remains basically the same, seek understanding. Whereas in chapter 1, wisdom began with fearing the Lord and it emphasized listening, and the reception of revelation, chapter 2 calls for active pursuit now through a string of imperatives, beginning with acceptance of revelation and progressing toward wholehearted seeking. In Proverbs, understanding, and here *tebunah* is a particularly prominent word that appears in verses 2, 3, 5, 6, 9, and 11, but more generally the understanding, the wisdom that is portrayed in Proverbs is not primarily theoretical.

It's usually closer to what the Greeks called *phronesis*, practical reason with which we live well in concrete worldly situations. It does still contain a contemplative element, for instance in the rumination and the attentiveness implied by verses 1 and 2, the desperate pursuit of verse 4, the storing up of verse 7, the internalization of verse 10, and so on. There is a contemplative element, it's something we chew on, this understanding, this wisdom.

The goal of such understanding though is not theoretical mastery, nor is it the kind of human mastery that modern knowledge so often is seeking. The *techne*, as the Greeks called it, and you can hear the overtones of the word technology there, the *techne* by which humans might understand the cosmos in order to control it, in order to master it by predicting and then creating or shaping things. We're not talking about practical reason in that technical sense.

We're talking about a wisdom that promises to guard us as people and the justice of our communities rather than leaving us simply to protect ourselves by our own mastery or our own methods. Treasure is the privileged metaphor here in verses 1, 4 and 7, in contrast with the promises of the gang from chapter 1. Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well, Matthew 6.33. That wisdom saying from Jesus conveys the point. We only find genuine treasure when we love God rather than money, and then God gives us the blessing of creaturely goods in the right way when we do so.

The second half of Proverbs 2 promises wisdom's deliverance from the many who with perverse joy pursue the way of death, in verses 12 through 15, and particularly deliverance from the adulterous in verses 16 through 19, anticipating a later theme. We save ourselves by refusing their offers as well as by refusing to save ourselves. The parental lectures such as these in Proverbs 1 through 9 follow a pattern, an opening appeal to listen, complete with the motivation for doing so, the substance of the lesson, and then a conclusion, usually outlining the consequences for whether or not one chooses to pursue the good character enjoined in the lesson.

In Proverbs 2, the opening appeal is lengthy, arguably verses 1 through 11, and the chief lesson enjoins accepting wisdom's deliverance from destructive people, being saved from the way of evil, verse 12, and from the adulterous, verse 16. The chapter structure subtly emphasizes something further. The 22 verses equal the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet, and verses 11-12 bisect the chapter according to the dominance of two letters.

Given the parallel lengths of the subsections, the text emphasizes the completeness of divinely provided order. Nothing escapes God's notice or good providence for people who walk in the way of covenant life. So here style conveys substance.

The text is saturated with covenant language, commandments, and righteousness early on, hesed, or loyal, loving-kindness in verse 8, and vocabulary often used for apostasy, for instance, forsaking in verse 13. The point is there's an emphasis on God's order being manifest in covenant relationships here, and this emphasis on order is built into even the structure of the lecture in chapter 2. The style matches substance. Much in Proverbs 3 and succeeding chapters substantially repeat vocabulary and motifs that we've already started to encounter by now.

Yet slight shifts in emphasis signal some dramatic progression. In chapter 3, this progression involves holding on to wisdom now that we have heard her and begun to pursue her. So, do not forget my teaching, verse 1. Do not let loyalty and faithfulness forsake you, verse 3. Happy are those who in an ongoing sense find wisdom and those who get understanding, verse 13.

She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her. Those who hold her fast are called happy, verse 18. My child, do not let these escape from your sight.

Keep sound wisdom and prudence, verse 21. Undoubtedly, these exhortations can encompass those who are not yet initiated into wisdom, but the emphasis is increasing upon persisting in a relationship. The last command within the opening appeal of verses 1 through 12 tacitly acknowledges that simplistic retribution theology, as we call it, is wrong.

Good people do not always enjoy good circumstances, or else the exhortation here would not be necessary. Proverbs 24.16 will later provide a more explicit nuance about righteous suffering. The righteous falls seven times and rises again, but the wicked stumble in times of calamity.

There's going to be a temptation when we encounter these moments of dissonance to believe that wisdom is not worth holding on to. But if we get past a simplistic retribution theology in which good always immediately produces good, then we can realize that generalizations about the value of wisdom hold true without resting the incentive for wisdom on some sort of simplistic guarantee that obviously doesn't

hold true to life experience. An interlude in verses 13 through 20 of Proverbs 3 follows its opening appeal with praise of wisdom.

We ought to pursue wisdom like a marriage partner, yet in doing so we hug a tree of life, as it were, in verse 18. There are marital sorts of vocabulary here. In verses 19 and 20 we have a preliminary claim, anticipating chapter 8, that wisdom is the means by which the Lord created the cosmos to be stable and secure.

The symbolic uses of the Tree of Life here and elsewhere in scripture establish the potential ambiguity of what people call wisdom. If they embrace the God-given design for creaturely life, humans find blessing. But if they seek to live in autonomy from God through their own knowledge of good and evil rather than embracing God's tree of life, humans choose a deadly downfall.

Only God's merciful judgment prevents us from eternally sealing our doom within that form of idolatrous life. So, wisdom pursued on our own can be a vehicle for precisely the declaration of human independence that proved so deadly to us in the first place. As the Creator's gift, however, embraced when we respond to God coming toward us and calling out with his invitation, wisdom aligns us with God's design for our flourishing.

The resumption of direct address in chapter 3, verse 21 with my child introduces the next subsection and here we have the heart of the lesson. We should hold on to wisdom as our source of security and in so doing we should care for our neighbors. Such wisdom, in other words, focuses on how we use our money and our mouths in light of what our hearts find their security in.

Resonances with the book of James are therefore obvious here. Aside from others that I itemize in my commentary and you can find there, I'll just mention here, we even have in James a quotation from the Greek translation of Proverbs 3.34, God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. James 4.6. Augustine rightly suggests that there's hardly a page in the holy books in which this truth about humility and God's grace does not appear.

It provides a fitting summary in the conclusion of this chapter, Proverbs 3, regarding why Proverbs finds wisdom to consist in the fear of the Lord while finding the way to true life consists in the pursuit of wisdom. The God portrayed in Proverbs 3 and throughout the book is gracious, not lording tyrannically over human beings but wanting them to flourish. Proverbs 3.3 uses the language of steadfast love and faithfulness made definitive for God's character through the divine self-revelation that Moses received when he was hidden in the cleft of the rock in Exodus 34.

Because God is just and gracious, wanting everyone to flourish, all people undergo discipline sometimes and some people must undergo definitive judgment. Far from

putting justice and grace against each other, a biblical understanding of God's fatherly care for us actually liberates us from cultural dead ends in which justice and mercy are pulled apart. We need to keep them together because the God of Proverbs does.

God has standards, God has placed order within the creation for the gracious purpose of helping us to live well. And Proverbs 3 urges us not just to initially hear wisdom's offer and then to accept it, but to hold on to this wisdom because we believe that God wants us to enjoy shalom. The next lecture, Proverbs 4, is remarkably straightforward.

Direct address distinguishes three units, verses 1-9, verses 10-19, and verses 20-27. The first unit is the one that is most important. The first unit, verses 1-9, involves the father bearing witness to the family's wisdom tradition, quoting instructions from his childhood.

The society reflected in Proverbs is patriarchal, but in verse 3, the biblical text honors the mother as well. The second unit, verses 10-19, emphasizes the present father's faithfulness in teaching, to which the son must now adhere. The third and final unit, verses 20-27, is full of body parts and senses, along with verbs of physical position and movement.

At its heart is the heart, verse 23, from which action flows. We guard the heart, especially by way of the eyes and the mouth and the ears, namely by what we see, say, and hear. A crucial dimension of parental teaching and guarding of the heart concerns sexual fidelity, the explicit subject of Proverbs 5, which implicitly speaks to covenant relationships more generally.

The chapter begins with a call for listening to such teaching, which is equated with wisdom in verses 1 and 2. A rationale starts to unfold in terms of waywardness being deadly, verses 3-6. Emphatic direct address in verse 7 leads into the crucial exhortation about avoiding the adulteress in verse 8, in order to avoid disastrous consequences, verses 9-14. A second exhortation then unfolds the positive counterpart of sexual joy within marriage, verses 15-20.

And finally, there is a theological conclusion regarding the dangerous consequences that are at stake in the last three verses. While the main subject involves sexual fidelity, the theme of speech is also prominent. The young person's speech reflects his situation and what he listens to affects him.

Biblical exemplars elsewhere emphasize the need to reject offers of instant gratification that we hear. Moses, preeminent as a faithful son in God's house until the Messiah's revelation, Hebrews 3, 1-6, chose rather to endure ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin, Hebrews 11-25.

Perhaps more pointedly, Joseph nobly refused Potiphar's wife at great cost in Genesis 39.

These are the kinds of models that embody what Proverbs 5 is calling for. By contrast, like the rest of Proverbs, chapter 5 is chock full of bodily metaphors, which not only warn against adultery but also frankly celebrate marital sex as a divinely created gift. Even so, momentum starts to accumulate for an additional layer of meaning in which marital fidelity epitomizes spiritual fidelity to God.

We'll talk about that more with respect to chapter 7. The marriage covenant is essential to a biblical understanding of God's interaction with Israel and the Church. Thus, it is fitting to consider analogies between the protection of sexual fidelity and the pursuit of spiritual fidelity. The first five verses of Proverbs 6 warn the proverbial son not to serve as a guarantor for a neighbor's debts, concluding in verses 3b-5 with a string of exhortations to hurry away when you are extricating yourself from such a pledge.

The particular instance of sluggishness that's worrying the father in these verses leads to a more general exhortation against laziness in verses 6-11. In Proverbs, the one who fears God can learn from an ant's investment over the long haul. The created order is a source of moral knowledge from the Creator.

The son here may not yet be a sluggard, but parental warning is a necessary preventative measure. Neither is the sluggard yet a villain, as in verses 12-19 of chapter 6, or an adulteress or her victim, as in verses 20-35, but he or she has started down that road. Failure to prepare for personal security results more broadly in failure to provide for the needs of others in the family or community.

Naturally, then, 2 Thessalonians 3.10 garnered frequent citations in the early church, anyone unwilling to work should not eat. The context of Paul's command makes clear that idle hands are the devil's playground in a community. At first glance, the problem of surety for a guarantee for one's neighbor hardly fits into the same category as items like adultery.

After all, the Bible is not categorically opposed to all forms of lending. Modern economies built around the sophisticated incursion of debt and interest raise further dilemmas that I can't address here. But the larger theme about avoiding entanglements draws these various items together.

The 6, then 7 pattern in verses 16-19 of this chapter highlights a villain's most distinctive trait, following the broader pattern for lists of this kind that we're going to encounter in Proverbs, X, X plus 1. These X, X plus 1 sort of lists highlight the final item, the plus 1. So here, in verses 16-19, Proverbs ultimately opposes the breakdown of family unity and thereby of covenant bonds. Once again, human

households are a prime concern because they are the parables through which we learn to live with God. Proverbs 6, 16-19 also reads like the anti-beatitudes, with haughty eyes at the beginning in contrast to poverty of spirit, with hands that shed innocent blood in contrast to meekness and mercy, with a heart that devises wicked plans in contrast to purity of heart, with a lying witness who testifies falsely in contrast to suffering from people who revile us, and of course with one who sows discord in a family in contrast to peacemaking.

The prominence of sibilant sounds in these verses gives the effect of hissing throughout Proverbs' list. These are characteristics we don't want to have. They scare us like snakes.

It is no accident that pride comes first in this catalog of sins, while the list, as Waltke points out, moves down from head to feet. The heart, inevitably, is at the center. What draws all this material together is avoiding any sort of entanglements or ensnarements that could pull us off of the road pursuing wisdom.

Parental direct address reappears in verse 20. This time, unlike chapter 6 verse 1, with standard framing exhortations to maintain obedience, leading into promises of protection that parental teaching will provide, the epitome of that protection involves dame folly. Proverbs 7 follows with another lecture warning against the adulteress, with its literal sense pointing to further spiritual significance in several ways.

First, the surrounding context involves not just the climactic position of this lecture, but also its juxtaposition with Proverbs 8 regarding lady wisdom. The personification there and in Proverbs 9 regarding both lady wisdom and dame folly suggests that the adulteress of chapter 7 is starting to become more than initially meets the eye. Second, the extended introduction in Proverbs 7 emphasizes fidelity to traditional teaching, linking to lady wisdom in chapter 8. Since you are my sister in chapter 7 verse 4, conveys the intimacy of marriage rather than simple sisterhood.

For a sample parallel consider Song of Songs 4.9, you have ravished my heart, my sister, my bride. Third, pointing toward greater spiritual significance, several elements of the seduction scenario hint that more is going on than meets the eye. For one instance, how likely is it that the wise parent could watch the scenario unfolding? Verses 6 and 7. Fourth, religion enters into this scenario.

Notably, the terminology of chapter 7 and verse 14 probably refers to a fellowship sacrifice from Canaanite practices involving a meal, as Waltke suggests. Fifth, some language suggests double entendre, the chambers of death in verse 27. Elsewhere in Proverbs refers to innermost parts of the body or being.

In verse 26, the imagery Waltke says is closely related to the Babylonian Ishtar and the Sumerian Inanna, both of whom have the double function of being goddesses of love and war. While a warning really does persist then against succumbing physically to the adulteress, Proverbs has already profiled the deadly financial, social, and even physical consequences of that. Hence, this scenario further warns against the seductive potential of foreign religions and alternative wisdom, preparing us to recognize their sensual appeals.

Today, ironically, some more progressive Christians talk of wisdom in a seductive way, opposed to God's law, in a way that could actually lead to folly. It's no accident that certain liberal or progressive forms of Christian faith, which deemphasize the particularity of Jesus Christ and especially the Old Testament shaping of his vocation in favor of more generalized spirituality that can be found inside and outside of multiple religions, these more liberal forms of faith tend to depart from Scripture's traditional standards of sexual ethics. Even conservative Christians have now proven themselves willing to make considerable compromises with contemporary culture in this area.

Such tendencies are consistent with the religion-sexuality dynamic that's found in Proverbs 7. Treating the marriage covenant lightly figures literally and metaphorically into treating fidelity toward Yahweh lightly, and vice versa. Spirituality, like sex, meets primal human needs and longings, both personal and communal. By engaging our bodies in acts of self-transcendence, both sex and spirituality present powerful temptations for treating ourselves and others, even our experiences of God, as idols.

So, Proverbs 7 has great significance regarding our covenant relationship with God. In Proverbs 8, by contrast, Lady Wisdom, like Dame Folly, cries out very publicly. But while she is winsome, she seeks to gain a suitor's long-term attraction rather than practicing Dame Folly's short-term aggression.

Her appeal rests on the truth of her words, which do not merely convey mental knowledge. More profoundly, these words are righteous, and straightforward rather than devious and deceptive, as verses 6 through 9 emphasize. Hence, they have greater value than the choicest metals and jewels, verses 10 and 11.

The next ten verses, verses 12 through 21, unfold wisdom's value even further, including a connection to kingship, as wisdom is the principle by which rulers govern rightly. God's design is for leaders to mediate divine rule by way of wisdom. The end of Proverbs 8, then, in verses 32 through 36, contains the expected conclusion to the lesson.

Lady Wisdom offers a blessing to those who listen, carefully and constantly, in order to keep her ways. This blessing consists in life and, more profoundly than physical

existence, favor from the Lord. Alternatively, those who spurn wisdom love death, which, by implication, is not solely physical.

Notice the parallel with the end of Proverbs 7. Both chapters end with the starkness of death as the result of spurning Lady Wisdom. At the apex of Proverbs 8, verses 22 through 31 strengthen Lady Wisdom's case by tying her comprehensively to God's rule of the cosmos, not just in the present, but also in the remotest past, its creation, and, by implication, its future. The passage is famously disputed at several points regarding Christology, or whether it even relates to Jesus at all.

Lacking the necessary time to address that question well in this lecture, here I'll simply refer you to my commentary, and perhaps to a future lecture, to develop a reading that eventually connects with Jesus Christ learning from the Church Fathers, yet does so very carefully, trying to learn from modern biblical scholarship as well. I think that mysteries in this text do offer some reasons for thinking that the Holy Spirit overshadowed this personification of wisdom in order to say more than the human author knew at the time. In any case, while this appearance of wisdom anticipates a climactic invitation in chapter 9, and then this wisdom is collected and embodied in chapters 10 through 29, and it takes another climactic form in the woman of chapter 31, the persistent personification of wisdom, I think, hints at more than just a divine attribute or a set of collected words.

Indeed, wisdom's presence in the act of creation in chapter 8 suggests that more than an impersonal divine attribute is in view. Here's a little hint of how Proverbs 8 might come alive in light of Jesus Christ. Note verse 31.

The verse identifies humanity as integral to God's delight. And then it's worth noticing that Yahweh, God's covenant name, is the first word in chapter 8, verse 22. And Adam, humanity, is the last word in verse 31 of chapter 8. So, at the end of the first eleven stanzas and before the second eleven stanzas, wisdom, the creator in this section, verses 22 through 31, the creative mediator, says, I was there in verse 27.

We have Yahweh at the beginning, we have Adam at the end, and in the middle, we have wisdom saying, I was there as a mediator between God and humanity. I think that has suggestive implications. Proverbs 9 follows the winsome invitation of Lady Wisdom in Proverbs 8 with final offers from both her and Dame Folly.

These offers reach the climax of what has been carefully orchestrated in the preceding chapters. Now, in chapter 9, verses 1 through 6, wisdom offers a place at a table in her house, a metaphor connected to the ongoing theme of family stability. The seven pillars suggest that the house is fully constructed, pleasing to look at as well as secure.

The number seven indicates that elements of the passage operate in a symbolic register. Wisdom's construction project is a covenant community that will become the dwelling of God in the world, so that no longer will she merely cry out from the temple on high, as she does in verse 3. Indeed, as William Brown suggests, Lady Wisdom in Proverbs manages to bring holiness home, beyond the temple, into the city, and even into the household. The incarnation of God in Jesus Christ is the fitting embodiment, ultimately, of the extent of wisdom's divine condescension in our everyday lives.

Lady Wisdom is noble, yet she addresses the simple in person, and table fellowship bespeaks the intimacy into which God remarkably invites all of us. By contrast, mockers, the preoccupation of verses 7-12, simply abuse the wise person who addresses them. The expected results, long life or else suffering, follow these two types of people on two different paths.

Folly makes her counteroffer in verses 13-18. She too has a house, and she mimics wisdom's invitation from high places all her own, which, as we know from the rest of the Old Testament, are frequently associated with the idolatrous seduction of God's people. Folly goes after everyone, even those who are making their paths straight, verse 15.

Folly is deceptive, hiding her dead guests inside her house while highlighting the sensual delights of living on the edge. Her appeals to the forbidden fruit, so to speak, attempt to cover for laziness since she has not prepared a proper meal, and she actually just sits around verse 14. Whereas wisdom can promise a reward on her own, in verse 11, Folly's destructive end is narrated for her, in verse 18, by the sage.

Proverbs 1-9 invites us to enjoy the delights of fellowship with God and neighbor, here embodied in a festive meal, at the climax of a journey. By fearing our Maker, we can truly flourish, knowing how to live in harmony with the cosmos and the covenant community. As suggested in the discussion of Proverbs 1, such holy fear does not repel, but attracts.

The household metaphor in Proverbs 9 is profoundly appropriate. Ultimately, God invites us to a family celebration. The host's greatness does not terrify us but instead conveys a profound sense of privilege at the invitation.

The table is set and we will reach that ultimate feast by embracing divine wisdom, staying on the parental path near her house.

This is Dr. Daniel J. Treier in his teaching on Proverbs for Christian Living. This is session number 1, Proverbs 1-9, The Two Ways.