

Proverbs 4:14-19

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Wickedness leads to evil just like wisdom leads to righteousness.

According to The Book of Proverbs, wickedness (and wisdom as its counterpart) is not a solitary choice. Wisdom is a *path* that leads to a destination of wisdom. It is an approach to life, a pattern of making choices rather than a single choice we make. But there is also a *path* that the *wicked* follow. Our means of choosing a path is to make choices that align with a perspective or worldview we adopt. Our single actions of wickedness (or of wisdom) are indicators of which *path* we are on. So Solomon is here addressing the heart of the matter. The symptom of being on the *path of the wicked* is a *wicked* action. The symptom indicates the underlying disease, which is a perspective and lifestyle of wickedness.

The warning to begin this passage is *do not enter the path of the wicked*. The *path* of wickedness can best be avoided by never starting that journey. Once we are on a road, it takes a bit of effort to get off of it and onto another one. *Do not proceed in the way of evil men*. This progression is the kind of thing spoken of by the New Testament writer James, in James 1:15. There he says, “after desire has conceived it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown gives birth to death.” One thing leads to another. Wickedness leads to evil. The best way to avoid the destination is to never *enter the path of the wicked* in the first place.

These warnings are clear and definitive. Just don’t mess with wickedness. *Avoid it, don’t pass by it*. The phrase *don’t pass by* indicates we shouldn’t even go near, even to look. Dodge wickedness at all costs. Steer clear. This is the path of destruction. *Turn away from it. Pass on to a better way*. Proverbs (and other Wisdom books such as Ecclesiastes) speak of foolishness as the gateway to wickedness. Wickedness is a path to evil. And evil leads to the consequence of death. “Death” means separation. Wickedness separates us from wisdom and the highest and best fulfillment of life. Solomon is warning us to avoid the shallow waters of wickedness because the undercurrent is strong and the riptides are likely to sweep us away to drown in a sea of sin and sorrow.

Solomon explains this consequence in the following verses. When one is on the path of wickedness, they are surrounded by it. Sin is their filter, the way they see the world. The way they perceive their options. *For they cannot sleep unless they do evil; and they are robbed of sleep unless they make someone stumble*. A *wicked* perception stirs *wicked* intentions and leads to *evil* actions. If we view the world through this kind of lens, it won’t be enough to just sit back and stew. It will drive us, like all of our perceptions, toward action. And our action will be *evil*, which leads to a consequence of death.

Our *evil* actions focus on making *someone stumble*. We desire harm to come to others. We wish for and plot their demise. Perhaps we become their judge, jury, and executioner. Perhaps we merely envy. In any case, this is the opposite of “love your neighbor as yourself.” The fruit of Wisdom leads to freedom, self-governance, harmony, and love. Real love, true harmony, is only

possible if it is chosen. Coerced unity is slavery. It is one person plotting and scheming to harm another. It is someone who *cannot sleep* until they find a way to *make someone stumble*. The fruit of wickedness is tyranny.

The path of wickedness, is not a mere abstraction or theory. Wickedness requires activity. Our actions affect our thinking. Thinking affects emotions. Emotions lead us to do, and the cycle repeats. The way of wickedness begins with one wicked action. One wicked action alters our thinking to justify our action. It is a perpetuating cycle.

If we are on its *path*, our perception is affected, and aligns with wickedness. Our emotions then align with this altered perspective, which then begs for action. They won't let us rest until we *do* according to the path. Wickedness won't let you *sleep* until you act out *evil* and (likely) commit to recruiting others to join you (misery loves company, and guilt recruits). This will *rob* the wicked of *sleep*, of peace. The anger and hatred toward others that attend wickedness are not compatible with *peace* that attends the wise.

The *wicked* heart is continually asking the person to act and perceive in a way that is not in alignment with reality. Wickedness convinces us it leads to fulfillment when in actuality it is self-destructive. The true path to gain our best self-interest is the path of wisdom. Because humans are made in the image of God, deep down we know that living in wickedness leaves us dissatisfied. Wickedness contends we need "more," which leads us to slavery and addiction. It leads us to a restlessness to do ever more *evil*.

They (the wicked) eat the bread of wickedness and drink the wine of violence. The path of wickedness becomes their sustenance (their *bread*). It runs through them and leads them to *drink the wine of violence*. *Violence* begins with attitudes such as hatred and envy, as Jesus stated in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:21-30). We resort to *violence* in order to coerce circumstance to obey our will. It reinforces itself, and calls us into more wickedness. It becomes a perverted reality, seeping into our hearts, minds, and hands. As an abundance of *wine* can take over our senses and put us under its control, so can *violence*. The wicked *drink the wine of violence*. However, as Solomon has already taught us, those who seek *violence* will be the victims of *violence* (Proverbs 1:18-19).

Clearly wickedness is a slippery slope. Its perversion can become an all-encompassing pattern. This is why Solomon gives such a stark warning to avoid it. Don't go anywhere close to it.

On the other hand, *the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn*—full of hope and promise and truth. It illuminates the way. It replaces the *darkness* of night with the *light of dawn*—a new day. Whereas wickedness leads deeper and deeper into *darkness*, away from peace, the path of the *righteous* leads deeper and deeper into the *light* of peace. The truth of righteousness *shines brighter and brighter until the full day*. Both false and true perspectives have exponential effects. The light grows from hope to fulfillment. *Darkness* spirals into despair and madness. Each compounds on itself.

Walking in wisdom requires choosing a perspective that is true, a mindset based on trusting God, and choices that align with wisdom's path. Trusting God leads to understanding. Understanding

shows the path of wisdom. One compounds to the other. When circumstances are difficult, the opportunity to act in wisdom expands.

We gain *brighter and brighter* days as we press into truth and trust in God. *Until the full day*. The *full day* can be viewed as the day when we reach heaven and the fullness of truth is laid before us. When each deed is judged, and all is brought to light (1 Corinthians 5:10; Mark 4:22). This will be a devastating day for those on the path of wickedness. But for the righteous, it is a culmination and a continuation of the path they have traveled.

The *full day* might also be viewed as any time when we see reality as it is. When we see wickedness for what it is. When we see through evil's clever disguise, dressing death as though it was life. In the *full day* we can see clearly that the way of wisdom is the way of life. Our understanding allows us clarity that our own self-interest is best achieved when we submit ourselves in full service to God's ways.

The way of the wicked is like darkness. They cannot see truly, which hampers their ability to walk without tripping. *They do not know over what they stumble*. The *wicked* can't figure out what they are tripping over. They can't figure out why what they are doing does not seem to work. And they drive themselves deeper and deeper into the shackles of separation from trusting God, misalignment from truth, and the ill effects of evil. They are convinced they are serving their self-interest, but experience destruction. Rather than progressing toward the *light* of a *full day*, they continually regress away from the *light*, into *darkness*.

Biblical Text

¹⁴ Do not enter the path of the wicked And do not proceed in the way of evil men. ¹⁵ Avoid it, do not pass by it; Turn away from it and pass on. ¹⁶ For they cannot sleep unless they do evil; And they are robbed of sleep unless they make someone stumble. ¹⁷ For they eat the bread of wickedness, And drink the wine of violence. ¹⁸ But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn That shines brighter and brighter until the full day. ¹⁹ The way of the wicked is like darkness; They do not know over what they stumble.