

# Proverbs 5:1-6

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/prov/prov-5/proverbs-51-6/>

*By giving our attention to wisdom, we participate in truth and life. The alternative is a sweet-sounding temptation but leads quickly to bitterness and death.*

Solomon continues his endorsement of wisdom, once again addressing his audience as *my son*. These pleadings are driven by an undercurrent of familial affection.

The first verse of Chapter 5 is very similar to the phrasing of Proverbs 4:20 (as well as Proverbs 2:2): *My son, give attention to my wisdom*. Throughout the first five chapters, Solomon's case for wisdom is coming in waves. This statement is to let the audience know another wave is coming. To remind them to pay *attention*, to not drift off to sleep. *Incline your ear to my understanding* is phrased almost exactly the same as in Proverbs 4:20. Solomon's wisdom leads him to recognize what has been confirmed in our age: repetition is an essential ingredient in learning.

But, in addition to repetition, Solomon also adds to his case for wisdom. He adds benefits to following the way of wisdom, that his teachings are "life to those who find them" (Proverbs 4:22). Solomon repeats the admonition here to listen intently to his *wisdom* and *understanding* so his audience might be able to *observe discretion*, and prevent themselves from following a path that looks inviting but leads to *death*. Wisdom not only leads to life, it provides a means to avoid death.

One of Solomon's primary concerns seems to be combating distraction. Focus is the order of the day. *Give attention* and *incline your ear* are both commands of focus, of intention. They are an admonition to make a decision. To exercise willpower to choose to focus on listening to wisdom instead of drifting into distractions or complacency.

The payoff for this intentionality is *that you may observe discretion and your lips may reserve knowledge*. This use of the word *observe* is like how we use the word to *observe* a holiday or a custom. The Hebrew word for *observe* is "shamar" and can also mean "keep." The word right after it is "mazimmah" (translated *discretion* here) that has a root meaning of "purpose." So these two Hebrew words together create the phrase "keep purpose." When the purpose is harmful, the resulting consequence is harmful. The Hebrew word "mazimmah" (*discretion*) is sometimes translated "device." When we *observe discretion*, we can sniff out harmful schemes. We know when something is toxic and can discern when it is in our best interest to avoid "eating the poisoned apple." We "keep" the "purpose" for which we were created and to which we are called to steward. We are able to hold to this because we are walking in *wisdom* and *understanding*.

In the same way, *your lips may reserve* (or *guard*) *knowledge*. Instead of speaking folly, *wisdom* and *understanding* will enable you to speak what is real. To *reserve knowledge*. To avoid saying things that are not true or doing things with the hope of gaining a superficial benefit, such as the "excitement" of a sexual affair.

This suggests that receiving *wisdom* allows us to share *wisdom*; to pass it along. To preserve it. Solomon has established that wisdom was present when the world was made and the legacy of understanding has been passed not just from God to man but from man to man throughout the generations. By inclining ourselves to *wisdom*, we get the chance to bear witness to this lineage, guarding its value. To proclaim reality and to reinforce what is true.

The word *lips* indicates spoken word that communicates thought. We can speak audibly or internally. Words or thoughts are the gateway to the soul. Through them, our inner sense of what is true, right, and best is communicated. The word for *lips* here is the same word as “language” used in the story of The Tower of Babel in Genesis 11: “Now the whole earth used the same language...”

The *lips* of the wise *reserve* (guard) *knowledge*. But *the lips of an adulteress drip honey*. The real temptation of sin is the false promise that things can be easier. A promise that happiness comes through following our appetites, rather than curbing them. We are promised the illusion that if we control our circumstances or the people around us, we can bring forth an imagined reality that fulfills our dreams. This is enticing. A proposition that seems sweet, like *honey*.

The *adulteress* here is tempting the young men in Solomon’s audience to turn from reality and attempt to cheat truth. *Smoother than oil is her speech*. The *adulteress* tells us what we want to hear and feeds our fleshly appetites that urge us to be god rather than serve God.

As nice and comfortable and easy as this all sounds when we hear the *lips* of the *adulteress*, it is not true. It is not real. The reality is the opposite. What she promises as life is actually death. In previous chapters, Solomon has talked about discipline as a close relative to wisdom ([see notes on Proverbs 3:11-18](#)). Truth is not always comfortable or easy. This is why we need the stamina to *reserve* (guard) *knowledge*. It takes the diligence of a sentry guarding a treasure to preserve knowledge and hold to what is true in the face of the alluring promises of the *adulteress*.

There is a very practical reason why we should avoid something that seems so sweet: the delicious “drink” is toxic. *In the end she is bitter as wormwood*. *Wormwood* is a bitter herb that is thought to have been used in ancient times for medicinal purposes. The temptress promises the sweetness of honey, but delivers the bitterness of nasty-tasting medicine. The initial taste is an illusion. The sweetness of *honey* turns to *bitter* nastiness in due time. The experience does not match the promise.

The *lips*/language of the *adulteress* are *sharp as a two-edged sword*. We might imagine one edge is a false promise. An untrue assertion that we can control circumstances or people. That we can extract pleasure from others and keep it for ourselves. That this will bring us happiness. But this is not true. The truth is that adulterous engagements are two people attempting to extract from one another. Like two ticks sucking each other dry. There will be no lasting happiness, and the sword of adultery will sever relationships that could otherwise lead to happiness. The trust of marriage is broken, for example. Our attempt to lead toward a sweeter reality instead leads to heartache and destruction. The promise fails.

We might imagine the other *edge* of the *sword* to be denying the opportunity to trust in God. To follow the way of the *adulteress* severs us from fellowship with God. It cuts us off from living according to reality, as God designed it. We ignore wisdom and become strangers to truth. The *adulteress* slashes us with her sword, and the result of our wounds is *death* (separation).

*Her feet go down to death, her steps take hold of Sheol.* *Sheol* is the abode of the dead, often translated as *grave* or *underworld*. It is an English transliteration of the Hebrew word “showl.” Anyone whose body goes to the grave experiences the separation of their spirit traveling to the next world. The *death* here could be due to the jealous husband of the adulteress taking his revenge. It could be the Jewish law requiring capital punishment for both the adulteress and the adulterer (Leviticus 20:10). It could also refer to judgment in the afterlife, being separated from the rewards we could have received had we been faithful.

Acts 2:27 quotes Psalm 16:10, and translates the Hebrew word “showl” into the Greek word “Hades.” “Hades” is a place of the dead in Greek mythology—apparently that image is close enough to *Sheol* that New Testament-era Jews used Hades to represent *Sheol* as a destination for the souls of the dead. Jesus describes Hades in His parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31). The rich man is said to go to Hades while Lazarus goes to “Abraham’s bosom”—an allusion to paradise. In that parable, the rich man’s focus upon his own pleasures and neglect of those whom he might have served landed him in torture in Hades. He looked over the chasm prohibiting him from accessing paradise (“Abraham’s bosom”). The fact that he could see but not participate must have made it much worse. [For more, read our Tough Topics Article on Hades, Hell, and Gehenna.](#)

When Jesus told the thief on the cross, “Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise,” it seems likely He was speaking of Abraham’s bosom (Luke 23:43).

The end result of choosing this alternative path of the adulteress is *death*. Even if the adulterer’s physical life is spared, he is separated from truly living. *Death* is separation; and it can be separation of any or all aspects of life. The *feet* of the adulteress rush into this abyss of *death*, even while still taking breath. Through faith in God, life is available through obedience. The choice between the path of wisdom and the path of the *adulteress* is the path of life or *death*. The path of wickedness is a long and encompassing misery. It steals the joy, peace, and fellowship with God out of life. Obeying God’s path is following the way He has marked out that leads to our very best interest.

The primary thing that makes living joyful, what it was designed to be, is harmony and fellowship with God and with other humans. Oneness of mission/purpose. Oneness in actions. This occurs through serving. Serving the mission and serving one another. Promiscuity, adultery, is all about taking. It leads to aloneness. It leads to separation from fellowship with God and with other people.

Perhaps the saddest indictment of the *adulteress* is found in verse 6—*she does not ponder the path of life*. In essence, she has ceased to think about what could be. She has drifted so far from reality that she cannot see it anymore. She is not even thinking about truth. It is out of sight and out of mind. The path of *death* and the steps of *Sheol* have become all she knows. *Her ways are*

*unstable, she does not know it.* For the *adulteress*, who is tempting the young men in Solomon's audience, *her ways are unstable.* She *doesn't know* she is stumbling around in darkness. She spends no time pondering *the path of life* because the proposition has drifted far from her vision. She is plagued by indifference to good, blinded by an inability to see. If viewed from this perspective, the *adulteress* should lose her allure. Solomon is offering a way to view the temptress in a manner that should evoke pity and disgust rather than excitement.

Lady Wisdom or the *adulteress*—which will you choose? These personifications mark the path for the young men whom Solomon instructs. In the end each of them (and us) must choose their own path—the principles, opportunities, and consequences apply to all humankind.

### **Biblical Text**

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Incline your ear to my understanding;  
2 That you may observe discretion  
And your lips may reserve knowledge.  
3 For the lips of an adulteress drip honey  
And smoother than oil is her speech;  
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 take hold of Sheol.  
6 She does not ponder the path of life;  
Her ways are unstable, she does not know it.**