

Proverbs 9:13-18

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Folly's strategies are meant to deceive and confuse, but the differences in messaging show that folly is the way to death and only wisdom is the path of life.

The ways of Lady Wisdom represent the path of our best interest. The foundation for the way of Wisdom is the fear of the Lord. The fear of the Lord leads us to acknowledge reality, namely the cause-effect reality of God's design of the moral universe.

Conversely, the *woman of folly* represents the harmful absurdity of the other way—the way of pride. She is described elsewhere in Proverbs as a stranger and an adulteress. She seeks her own way and serves her own appetite by exploiting others. The verses preceding these (see notes on Proverbs 9: 10-12) speak directly to the value of wisdom and the way it helps serve our deep desire to live a meaningful and significant life.

The woman of folly is the antithesis to the right way. Verse 13 describes three specific manifestations of this. The first is that *the woman of folly is boisterous* (vs 13). Literally, she is loud. Noisy. The subtext here is that she replaces meaningful messaging with meaningless chatter. As if volume and frequency can overcome a lack of substance.

Next, Solomon adds that *she is naïve and knows nothing*. The word for *naïve* here is not the same word Solomon has used to describe his young audience. When Solomon is describing his audience as naïve (1:4, 7:7, 8:5, 9:4), he is using a word that is more closely akin to “uninformed.” The word here for the *woman of folly* is “petayyut” and it comes from a root that means “silliness” or “absurdity.”

Although there is a distinction, the two words are closely related. This *silliness* (almost insanity) seems to be the full manifestation of continuing in ignorance (naivety). This is the *way of the woman of folly* and, the undertones suggest, the inevitable way of the naïve young men if they do not choose the path of wisdom. Perhaps this is deliberate ignorance, someone who had the opportunity to choose wisdom and declined.

The phrase *knows nothing* is another strong indictment. She exists in denial of reality. There is no true knowledge to her, only perversion and clamor. She attempts to create her own reality, and lives in an illusion.

Having described something of her nature, Solomon next describes something of her methods. *She sits at the doorway of her house, on a seat by the high places of the city* (vs 14). This description seems to place her very close to the house of Lady Wisdom (Proverbs 9:1-3).

Lady Wisdom's house, however, is described as being at the “top of the heights of the city,” suggesting it has the prominent spot, the pinnacle. The woman of folly is *by the high places*, not quite there but close. This speaks to her strategy; she mirrors the ways of Lady Wisdom from a

position of inferiority. We can recognize this as a prime strategy of sin—a perversion of righteousness, looking close enough to fool the naïve heart.

Again, like Lady Wisdom (Proverbs 9:4-6), the woman of folly is *calling to those who pass by* (vs 15). She is evoking the same “marketing strategy” as Lady Wisdom, trying to mimic it and poach those who might otherwise find the true path. Folly calls to those *who are making their paths straight* (vs 15). She is trying to derail those who are on the proper way, to nab them and turn them away from the oath of wisdom.

And this is what she calls: “*Whoever is naïve, let him turn in here*” (vs 16). This quote is word for word the same as what Lady Wisdom calls to passersby (Proverbs 9:4). If one is not fully informed and aware, it seems as though it might be easy to mistake Folly’s call with Wisdom’s. Folly promises life, but delivers death. The next phrase, *and to him who lacks understanding, she says* also seems as though it is copy and pasted from the description of Lady Wisdom in verse 4.

The message here is this: Wisdom and Folly are the two binary paths. Each promises the same thing: life. But only one delivers: Wisdom. They are both after every human soul. And Folly, primarily being a perversion of Wisdom, often implements mimicking tactics.

But Folly can only mimic for so long. It seems as though these introductory strategies are to try to lure people from the straight path.

To him who lacks understanding, she (woman of Folly) *says, “Stolen water is sweet; and bread eaten in secret is pleasant* (vs 17)” This is in stark contrast to what Lady Wisdom said to the passersby in verse 5: “Come, eat of my food and drink of the wine I have mixed” (Proverbs 9:4-6). Wisdom is offering food (in a metaphorical sense) in openness and community, possessed and given by her (“my” food). This is the offer of actual life from choosing self-governance, love of neighbor and service to others (Matthew 22:37-39). It is in choosing this path, the narrow path, that vibrant communities are built and true fulfillment is found.

On the other hand, the woman of folly speaks of *stolen water* as *sweet*. The call is to take what is not yours, claim possession of that which truly belongs to God (the original sin and a great force behind all sin). Folly proclaims that thievery is beneficial. That stealing something and making it your own is the key to joy. It is a seduction. The promise is that life comes through exploitation of others. This path leads to a contest to see who can be the chief exploiter, and the exploiters inevitably become the exploited.

The path to life is based on faith that God’s way is for our best. This recognizes God’s design, that He created the world with moral cause-effect, just as He created the world with physical cause-effect. The opposite of such faith is pride, the belief that we can determine our own moral reality (Habakkuk 2:4). We can disbelieve moral gravity, so to speak, but we will still “hit the ground.”

Further, Folly says that *bread eaten in secret is pleasant*. Again, this is in direct contrast to what Wisdom proposed in verse 5. Don’t come to the table, don’t join in community, don’t share—take what is yours and consume in gleeful gluttony alone.

As clearly unhealthy as these suggestions are, they are also very tempting. It is too often an effective seduction.

Solomon puts the cards on the table to close this section. *But he* (the foolish one) *does not know that the dead are there. That her guests are in the depths of Sheol* (vs 18).

This describes a sort of macabre scene where Folly's house is haunted by the ghosts of her victims that the naïve one cannot yet perceive. The path of folly is seductive because it speaks to our flesh, suggesting some instant gratification and some superficial appeal. It suggests we can lord over, exploit, and extract from others.

This is the way to death (Matthew 7:13-14), separation from God's design. God designed the world to be connected, to be in harmony. When we love and serve, we seed and cultivate harmony. We recreate God's good design. This appears to be difficult, but leads to life (Matthew 7:13-14).

Although it may seem inviting, the path of folly is the path of meaninglessness and destruction. And although it may seem arduous, the path of wisdom, of love and service, is the true path to life.

We have been given an immense stewardship—the stewardship of our choices. The consequence of our decision is enormous. Wisdom and Folly are both calling out, seeking us to follow. Just as Wisdom and Folly call from without, the Flesh and Spirit contest within (Galatians 5:16-17). Which we choose results in either fulfilling the law of love, or living in a brutal world of biting and devouring (Galatians 5:13-15). Scripture is consistent throughout, and urges us to choose life (Deuteronomy 30:19; Matthew 7:13-14; Galatians 6:8).

Biblical Text

**The woman of folly is boisterous,
She is naive and knows nothing.
¹⁴ She sits at the doorway of her house,
On a seat by the high places of the city,
¹⁵ Calling to those who pass by,
Who are making their paths straight:
¹⁶ “Whoever is naive, let him turn in here,”
And to him who lacks understanding she says,
¹⁷ “Stolen water is sweet;
And bread eaten in secret is pleasant.”
¹⁸ But he does not know that the dead are there,
That her guests are in the depths of Sheol.**