

She Is Bitter

Proverbs 5:1-14 | Bryce Beale | April 9, 2017

In midday when the sun should have shone, there was a darkness that could be felt. Within the span of six hours absolutely every element wrong with the world—the cyberbullying and suicides, the political scandals, the disrupted relationships and diseases—set themselves up like armies to besiege a single mount.

Six hours our Savior was suspended between earth and sky. The angel of death loomed over Golgotha and stood with a vengeful sword held over his head, prepared to strike the sins of mankind. And only this King of Israel, Son of David, with his thorny crown could ask that the blow above Jerusalem be diverted.

Like a Superman blazing through space to meet a comet bound for earth, or like the Iron Giant flying toward the missile that would otherwise destroy the world, Jesus is lifted from the earth and opens his arms to receive the fury of God for sin.

If you have ever wondered why God would create an eternal hell, know that an eternity of torment in utter darkness is the only mortal punishment that matches the heinousness of our sin.

So do not wonder that hell goes on forever—wonder instead at this Savior in torment and utter darkness, that in six hours he satisfies a penalty that you or I could not exhaust in six millennia.

The armies of evil converge on Calvary, and the fist of God falls. World wars are dust bunnies in comparison.

You who stand beneath the cross and who, by faith, are hidden in its shadow from the heat of God's wrath—when you look up toward the back of this man of sorrows, you can only imagine what an eternal hell contracted into half a day may feel like.

You must attempt to sympathize with the unfathomable pain of his destruction, and know that it is as if on the sign above his head these words were written: "Behold, the consequence of sin."

The cross signifies many things to mankind: the love of Christ, the righteousness of God, the promise of forgiveness.

But we must never forget that the grim pain and misery of that cross, the world-shaking agony felt by the God-man upon it, is meant to signify this too: the sinfulness of sin.

Your sin, O Christian, in hatred forged the metal spikes which hold this gentle Lamb in place; your lustful looks, your proud musings, your harsh words, all of these are the thorns half-sunken in his head; do not blame the Jews, and do not judge the Romans—the axe which felled the tree for his cross is still in your hand!

Brothers and sisters, God shows you his opinion of sin by this portrait of his brutalized Son. If nothing else should dissuade you from sin, won't his eyes on that dark day succeed in doing so? They are all love and pity mixed with desperate sorrow, and they look down upon every sin you commit and, we might say in human terms, they almost feel afresh each time the pounding of the nails. You grieve the Spirit of Christ! You strike the heart of God.

On purpose God has joined sin and sin's consequences, to teach us that sin is nothing to be trifled with. In the words of John Bunyan, sin is "the dare of [God's] justice, the rape of his mercy, the jeer of his patience, the slight of his power, and the contempt of his love."¹ All of this is proven at the consequence of the cross.

My prayer for our brief time together this morning is that God will take his branding iron, still red from the furnace, and press it against the tender flesh of our minds, leaving this imprint: "Behold, the consequence of sin." My desire is that God will teach us to hate sin more than anything we have ever hated, and not to tolerate its presence in our lives without an ongoing and violent attempt to oust it.

PROVERBS 5:1-14

The sin set forward in this text is the sin of adultery. But the principles set forward apply to all sin, and so we will approach the text in more general terms. The strange woman is a temptress for sexual immorality, but every sin has its temptress. Every sin recommends itself to us and asks that we embrace it.

Our intention then this morning is to consider, first, what this woman of sin seems like—she seems sweet. Secondly we will remove her mask and see what she really is—she is bitter. And finally we will consider how we should respond to her, which Solomon urges throughout these verses.

She seems sweet

First then, we see the strange woman of sin on her corner, and we ask, "What does she seem like?"

¹ *The Complete Works of John Bunyan*, XX. ("Mr. John Bunyan's Dying Sayings")

Verse 3 answers, “For the lips of a forbidden woman drip honey, and her speech is smoother than oil.” She seems sweet.

This is precisely the reason that for some of you, I will waste my breath this morning. The appeal of God and Scripture will have no measurable effect on your lives; your attachment to sin before you entered this room, and your attachment to it when you leave it, will be the same. Or if your emotions are touched, you will alter your actions for a few days, but afterward will return to the mud and vomit.

Because the grotesque scene of the cross I presented before is not how sin presents herself to you. The politician whose career is ruined and whose reputation is destroyed, did not see sin as containing these woes. He saw sin, in the moment, as sweet and smooth. Temptation is badly mannered, but well-spoken.

Pleasurable

So let us admit now at the outset, that sin does have its pleasures. Not every honeyed word the temptress speaks is a lie, and if you pursue a life of sin, you will find some things very enjoyable.

Oil and honey are both pleasant.

Consider these words also written by Solomon, but about his wife-to-be: “How much better is your love than wine, and the fragrance of your oils than any spice! Your lips drip nectar, my bride; honey and milk are under your tongue.”² Here is a romantic love designed by God and instilled with heaven-given joys, both honey and oil. God created romantic love and the pleasures that attend it, so when the devil perverts it for his own purposes, he is still working with real pleasures.

C. S. Lewis captured this thought in one of his writings, in which he pretends to be one demon writing to another. The demon explains:

Never forget that when we are dealing with any pleasure in its healthy and normal and satisfying form, we are, in a sense, on [God’s] ground. I know we have won many a soul through pleasure. All the same, it is His invention, not ours. He made the pleasures: all our research so far has not enabled us to produce one. All we can do is encourage the humans to take the pleasures which [He] has produced, at times, or in ways, or in degrees, which He has forbidden.³

This Woman Sin, she has taken a type of pleasure fashioned by God, and forced it out of joint. She sells her wares on the black market for they are stolen goods. But if you buy a set of tires stripped illegally off of a

² Song of Solomon 4:9-11 (ESV).

³ *The Screwtape Letters* (XX), XX. (letter 9)

parked car, although you have supported criminality you still end up with real tires.

When you take pleasure in sin, you often find a real pleasure. I cannot deny it. This is why sin seems so sweet.

Immediate

But further, the sweetness of sin is found in its immediacy.

Holy pleasures take time to foster—our eternal bliss begins when Christ returns, which is yet future. And the delight to be found now in reading Scripture, in prayer, and in giving our lives for the good of others, requires time. If we do not cultivate our spiritual senses by discipline first, we will not find pleasure in spiritual exercises afterward.

“But,” says the temptress, “you do not need to wait for pleasure. I can give it to you now.”

When you return home after an exhausting day of work, disheartened by the circumstances of your life and worn down by a sense that nothing will ever change, then the computer begins to call from your study room. “Come to me, if you are weary and heavy laden—I can give you rest right now. You are a few clicks and a few seconds away from pleasure.”

A voice can be heard also from the fridge in your kitchen: “You have had a hard day—I understand! And I can help you cope with it. It will only take a few seconds and some chewing, and your problems will seem much less.”

But above the fridge another voice speaks, from the cupboard where you keep your wine: “I’m also here to help. It won’t take much time or much effort, and you can forget about whatever worries you.”

Listen closely, and you will hear voices from the bathroom too. Medications in the medicine cabinet are whispering their promises of relief if you take a bit more than is needed; a razor sits by the sink and suggests you cut yourself and forget your other pains; and the toilet says you can binge eat for pleasure and then empty your stomach there.

Notice, every voice offers you pleasure *now*. The lips drip with honey, the speech is smoother than oil.

Freedom

And lastly, the lips of the temptress seem sweet because they promise freedom.

“This is the way of an adulteress,” the Proverbs later say: “she eats and wipes her mouth and says, ‘I have done no wrong.’”⁴ The stuffy constraints of your Puritanical parents are heavy, aren’t they? The forbidden woman is exciting because she stands outside of the fence. Her sonorous voice promises pleasure without guilt, without limit, without bounds.

Sin seems sweet.

She is bitter

Perhaps you are presently involved in some habitual sin, and the sun is shining upon you. You are in a forbidden relationship, you are pushing the boundaries of decency, or you are in the early stages of an addiction.

And it feels like pleasure, like freedom. Birds sing their songs from the green trees around you, and puffy white clouds roll by. The sky is as blue as it has ever been.

Everything seems sweet.

I know that God loves you, and I know it in this way: because he has placed you within earshot of this warning, given in Proverbs 5.

Look again at verse 3, but this time continue to the verse that follows it:

For the lips of a forbidden woman drip honey,
and her speech is smoother than oil,
but in the end she is bitter as wormwood,
sharp as a two-edged sword.⁵

Here is the fact about sin: she seems sweet, but she is bitter.

The sky may be clear over your corrupt lifestyle this morning, but dark clouds are forming in the distance.

In the end

“In the end,” it reads, *“she is bitter.”*

An older generation, wisened by the years their eyes have seen, look on a younger generation and wince. When you see a young woman enamored with a boy, so that she gives herself to him completely and thinks she has found true love, and when you observe his selfish immaturity, don’t you cringe? You know what the consequence will be—breakings of the heart that will permanently scar. She sees his smile, not the years of single parenting that may lie before her. He

⁴ Prov. 30:20.

⁵ Prov. 5:3-4.

speaks smoothly, and she hears his well-oiled words, not her own bitter weeping which will follow when he leaves her for another.

Folly asks only, “What is?” But wisdom probes deeper to, “What will be?”

The thick clouds roll across the sky, nearer and nearer your sunshine. You only have so much of yourself to spend in this life, and only so much time to spend it; never forget your deathbed! As Paul writes, “Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption.”⁶

See the deathbed confessions of the one who wastes himself on sin, beginning in verse 11 of our text:

and at the end of your life you groan,
when your flesh and body are consumed,
and you say, “How I hated discipline,
and my heart despised reproof!
I did not listen to the voice of my teachers
or incline my ear to my instructors.”⁷

Do not allow this to be you! Right now the word of God teaches you, the Spirit of God instructs you through this oracle. If still you hear my voice, you are not yet at your end, and there is a place for repentance. Turn to the man upon the cross, and let him take your darkness. Give the temptress your cold shoulder—let it be absolutely icy toward her, stuff your ears with wax. Do not hate discipline, do not let your heart despise reproof—reproofs of discipline are the way of life.⁸

The consequences

Look at verse 4 once again to see the twofold consequence of sin.

Bitterness

There is, first, a bitterness about sin, as bitter as the leaves of the wormwood plant. That is, sin is the companion of pain and tears and misery.

Verses 9 and 10 explain: Do not give yourself to the temptress

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

⁶ Galatians 6:7-8.

⁷ Prov. 5:11-13.

⁸ Prov. 6:23.

lest strangers take their fill of your strength,
and your labors go to the house of a foreigner.

This rings true in this world.

When the gambling addict enters a luxuriant casino and marvels once again at the high ceilings, the ornate decoration, the bright lights and colors, he forgets that he himself has paid for all of these.

Or think again of the pastor who has labored in the study, in the pulpit, and from house to house, only to surrender up his work to the flames by an extramarital affair.

A prominent pastor only a few years ago—I remember listening to one of his sermons while I mowed my yard—who published several books, and contributed to a blog I sometimes read, was exposed as having been involved in two extramarital affairs in the midst of his ministry. He has now divorced his wife and remarried.

What are all his books now? What are his sermons, and how many will give careful ear to them?

As he himself said afterward, “I hope and pray that the events in my own life over the past couple years serve as a warning to all who, like I did, believe they are standing firm. Sin is deep. It is real. It destroys. It deceives.”⁹

The public shame that sin loves to lead us to is expressed by the regretful sinner in verse 14 of our text: “I am at the brink of utter ruin in the assembled congregation.”

Yes, the pleasure of sin is immediate, but it gives way to a long, long regret. “What fruit,” writes Paul to believers about their former unbelief, “were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed?”¹⁰ Only one more chapter in Proverbs and we will read, “Can a man carry fire next to his chest and his clothes not be burned? Or can one walk on hot coals and his feet not be scorched?”

Yes, sin is a fire—when you approach it at first it offers you comforting warmth. But if you finally lay hold of the flame, it will leave you badly burnt.

⁹ Morgan Lee, “Tullian Tchividjian Confesses Second Affair Concealed by Two Coral Ridge Elders,” ChristianityToday.com, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/2016/march/tullian-tchividjian-confesses-second-affair-coral-ridge.html> (March 21, 2016; accessed April 9, 2017).

¹⁰ Rom. 6:21.

Death

And if these things ring true in this world, how much more are they true for the world to come, for that “new heavens” and “new earth in which righteousness dwells”?¹¹

For not only is sin a bitter substance, but it is a killing one. See again verse 4, in the latter half: she is “sharp as a two-edged sword.”

The verses that follow explain the meaning:

Her feet go down to death;
her steps follow the path to Sheol;
she does not ponder the path of life;
her ways wander, and she does not know it.

My friends, if you continue in sin, you will in the end find yourself in hell. This is the lake of fire, the second death, Gehenna, a place of weeping and the gnashing of teeth, a place where the fire is never extinguished and the worm never dies.

I do not invent this thought! Look at the feet of the temptress, how they lead you down and down and down to death.

We must grant that after so many thousands of years, the devil is at least as smart as an insect born within the last year. For even insects know how to put honey on the trail to their stomachs. The Orchid Mantis looks like a flower and sits still; and when the bee approaches expecting its nectar, it is eaten.

Listen to me!

I plead with you this morning, using the appeal given by the father in our text!

I read the first verse of our text as if your very soul might be spared an eternal torment by it: “My son, be attentive to my wisdom; incline your ear to my understanding.” Why? The second verse replies, “that you may keep discretion, and your lips may guard knowledge.” Why? The third verse answers, “*For* the lips of a forbidden woman drip honey.”

You will take the cheese unless you know it is set upon a trap; you will taste the honey unless you know that cyanide is in it. So latch on to this wisdom from above concerning sin: cyanide is in it!

God continues his appeal in verses 7 and 8:

And now, O sons, listen to me,
and do not depart from the words of my mouth.

¹¹ 2 Pet. 3:13.

Keep your way far from her,
and do not go near the door of her house.

Two voices are calling to you all this morning. I beg you to heed the voice of God.

Turn your eyes again to the darkened hill on which Jesus dies.

The pebble path leading directly to the cross is paved with every consequence in our passage, with every consequence of sin.

Solomon has appealed to his son, in view of sin's end, to end sin. But God makes his strongest appeal here, at the pinnacle of the gospel, on Golgotha.

This week the temptation will remain to go near the door of the temptress. She has put on her finest dress, applied her richest perfume, adorned her face with makeup and jewelry. She is eager to see you and will say so.

But remember that sin has its consequence.

If you are Christ's, know that every step you take toward the door of the temptress falls with the deafening thud of a Roman hammer upon the wrist of your Savior. His death atoned for every step in that direction. When she opens the door and bats her eyes at you, when she smiles and displays her white teeth within a red border, you hear behind you the lash against the bare back of Jesus. You have cost him that.

But remember this too: he chose to pay it.

His broken voice, so much unlike the rich and honeyed one of the forbidden woman, speaks from the cross: "My little sheep, no one takes my life from me, but I lay it down of my own accord."¹²

You choose your beauty every time sin presents itself. What do you find more appealing, the heartless ignorance of Lady Sin, or the compassion in the eyes of a dying Savior, who holds himself to the cross for your good?

I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, that you cast off the yoke of sin, and that in humble sorrow beneath the cross of Jesus you renew your renunciation of the temptress this day.

His love is much better than hers can ever be.

¹² See John 10:18.