

# Two Paths Diverged

Proverbs 1:8-19 | Bryce Beale | Feb. 5, 2017

When next you are speaking with someone, let me recommend that you mine for gold.

It is a loving thing to do. Gird yourself with a sincere interest in the other, and ask him or her thoughtful questions—cut through the rock with your pickaxe, pull away the stone.

And see if you can hit gold.

How will you know when you have hit it? The person's face will light up, their speech will grow more rapid. They will suddenly have much to say, and will seem very happy to say it.

We are all great mines of information we have gathered over our lives, but deep within these mines there are a few spots filled with precious ore.

You may talk with a stranger for twenty minutes about the weather, your respective hometowns, and other trivialities, but pull up only valueless earth; and then, at the twenty-first minute, you may mention in passing that your father used to take you fishing as a child.

You pull aside a mass of gravel, and suddenly your headlamp shines back at you on the face of hidden gold. The man's face lights up and his spirits are suddenly enlivened. Where before you had to carry the conversation along, now you can merely listen as he speaks of the best fishing holes in town and the varieties of fish to be found there, catchable with the baits of his recommendation.

But beware: you may like the old '49ers of California's gold rush strike a reservoir at the head of one stream, and with a newfound confidence take your pan over to the head of another stream, expecting the same. And you may find nothing.

The next person you speak to cares not at all about fishing.

Why is one's man's trash another man's treasure?

It is all in the mind.

There is nothing inherently glorious about fishing—but to the mind that thinks it so, it is gold.

How powerful our minds!

Why is Jesus gold to one mind, but mere rock to another? Why does one man find Jesus as if he had found a pearl of great price, so that he is willing to renounce every earthly pleasure for him, while another is unwilling to get out of bed to find him?

We might debate the value and joy of fishing and come to no certain conclusion, but few I hope will deny that the value of Jesus surpasses that of all the gold contained in the earth's crust.

Yet neither can we deny that many look upon the golden ore, and see a gray rock every time.

Whether we see gold or gravel depends upon our mind. It depends upon the way that we think.

How many mothers have begged their sons or daughters to consider the value of wisdom, to live an upright life and stay away from the dangers of addiction and immorality, and yet have seemed to those children to be extolling the beauty of dirt?

"Don't fall in with that crowd of people," says the mother. Yet the son hears, "Stay away from all the gold." The father adds his counsel to associate with godly men and women in the church, but to the son this sounds like, "Here are some rocks to play with, have fun."

As a man thinks, so it is to him.

And wisdom in large part, as the skill of living, is the alignment of our thoughts with what really is. The wise man will see gold as gold, and dirt as dirt.

And this we find in the early part of Proverbs, as gold and rock are set before us, and different voices try to convince us that both are gold. But one is a fool's gold; wisdom knows which.

Hear, my son, your father's instruction,  
and forsake not your mother's teaching,  
for they are a graceful garland for your head  
and pendants for your neck.  
My son, if sinners entice you,  
do not consent.  
If they say, "Come with us, let us lie in wait for blood;  
let us ambush the innocent without reason;  
like Sheol let us swallow them alive,  
and whole, like those who go down to the pit;  
we shall find all precious goods,  
we shall fill our houses with plunder;  
throw in your lot among us;  
we will all have one purse"—

my son, do not walk in the way with them;  
hold back your foot from their paths,  
for their feet run to evil,  
and they make haste to shed blood.  
For in vain is a net spread  
in the sight of any bird,  
but these men lie in wait for their own blood;  
they set an ambush for their own lives.  
Such are the ways of everyone who is greedy for unjust gain;  
it takes away the life of its possessors.<sup>1</sup>

Two roads diverge in a yellow wood before us, and we cannot see the end of either. So how do we know which to take? How do we know which leads to gold, and which to rock?

By the voices.

To the right a father and a mother plead, "Come this way!"

To the left a group of young peers extend their hands, "Come this way!"

These are the two paths of Proverbs. You will choose one of them; no third road presents itself. And the question is: which will you think golden, and which common? As we shall see, life and death lie in the decision.

And so this morning we intend to consider both of these paths, and evaluate the pleas of all voices. We intend to search for gold.

## The Path of Wisdom

First, to the right where the parents call: the path of wisdom.

See again verses 8 and 9: "Hear, my son, your father's instruction, and forsake not your mother's teaching, for they are a graceful garland for your head and pendants for your neck."

I wish to take the side of Scripture now and plead with you to take the rightward path. In doing so, I must contradict the sensibilities of most of the world, and try in half an hour to convince you that what a million voices have harmoniously decried as worthless in your ear for many years, is actually gold—more than gold, is pure diamond and pearl.

But I do have this advantage: the truth is on my side. The world crafts its arguments well, and speak with fury and spit at one time, with graceful and well-oiled words at another—but it is weakened by the fact that it has to make its arguments up out of thin air. None of them are real.

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<sup>1</sup> Prov. 1:8-19 (ESV).

I at least have the freedom to convey facts to you, and if the truth is to prevail then so shall I.

So then, gaze along this path for a moment and let me tell you of its many pleasures and joys. This path, where the parents call to you, that stretches off to the right hand far into the underbrush, this is the path of beauty and light and joy. This path is the golden way. Lend me your thoughts, and I will attempt to persuade you.

### The way of love

First, see that this way is the way of love, in verse 8: “Hear, my son, your father’s instruction, and forsake not your mother’s teaching.”

As Ernie mentioned last week, when Proverbs calls you to walk the path of wisdom, it is really Christ appealing to you. He has become to us wisdom, and he stands beside these concerned parents and adds his appeal.

It is as if we hear our heavenly Father say the words: “Hear, my son, your father’s instruction.” The Spirit rustles through the leaves along this wooded path, and the wind at our back urges us to take this track.

You who are younger, the way of wisdom is not worth your footprints merely because your parents may call you to walk it. Parents are not always right. What if your parents are shortsighted and calling you to walk a path that they think in your best interests, but which really will keep you from satisfaction and fulfillment?

It’s a real and legitimate question.

But know that in this case it is not merely an earthly parent who reaches out his hand—it is Christ, who extends his hand to reveal the nail wound at his wrist.

Remove from your mind this question: Are my parents correct in calling me to this path? And ask instead this: Which voices really care about me? Those on the right—my parents and Christ—or those on the left—the peers who wish for me to join their gang?

Hear the voice of the gang on your left, in verse 11: “Come with us!” Isn’t this love? Isn’t this the promise of comradeship? Here is a place where you may lose your loneliness, where you may really belong. In verse 14 they say, “throw in your lot among us; we will all have one purse.”

Don’t they care about you?

But even as the question is asked, do you not remember that sense underlying all your relationships with such people, that sense which you

have never spoken because of fear, but which lurks in the caverns of your consciousness: “These are my friends, but I feel as if our friendship is held by a frayed thread. If I don’t do what they want, I’m not sure they’d stick around.”

Allow me to give voice to your fears and hesitations: they do not care about you. Those who have given themselves to the world cannot give themselves to you as well—they will be your friend only because you can help them get something they want, be it a larger purse, or an escape from loneliness. But when you are in your deepest need, they will have nothing to offer.

Look again at the other path. Do any care for you there?

There stand your mother and your father.

The prodigal limps along the familiar path, his clothes hard with filth, the smell of swine still strong upon him, his hair unkempt. Where is his gang? Where are those with whom he spent away his father’s wealth? They fled at the sound of the last coin to fall from his purse.

So he limps along until he comes in view of his old home, the place where his mother had nursed him perhaps, where his father had helped him take his first steps, where his mother had washed him after frolicking outside, where his father had perhaps taught him to work the earth or to hunt.

And no sooner can he see the home, then his father, still seated by the window after so much time, leaps up and pushes open the door and runs down the path. Father and son meet, and the father falls upon his son’s neck and weeps his relief and joy. But what does this son have to offer his father? Nothing whatsoever. But his father loves him.

You who are young, who cares for you more, your friends or your parents? Who has watched you grow, who celebrated your first words and first steps? Who has paid for your meals and opened their wallets to get you gifts or outings that they believed you would enjoy, just to see you smile? Your parents, or those friends recently brought into the periphery of your life?

So when your parents appeal to you, they deserve your attention. You may question their wisdom—but their long, loving sacrifice for you gives you reason not to ignore it.

When they say, “Son, when sinners entice you, do not consent,” it is because they want your best—they want you to have gold. They are at least more likely to desire your best than those friends who have a slight attachment to you, who would like to use you to fatten their own purses.

“But,” you say, “my parents really are fools. They don’t love me; they are acting in their own interests, rather than in my interests. Or if they do love me they are blinded and do not know what is best for me.”

You may be right.

Then look beyond the parents on the way, and see Christ. He has loved the world, though it hated him, and has borne the sins of his people on the cross. He has not refused to give us what we need, even when it was contained within his veins and would require his life to give it.

Here is gold, not only at the end of this rightward path, but even at its very beginning, within your view: it is the love of Christ. And this golden love lines the entire path to your right.

Friends, I must pray for you what Paul prayed for the Ephesians, that God might make you to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, to see it for the gold it truly is, and to choose this way of love.

### The way of happiness

But we have only begun to speak of the pleasantness of this path. For this is not only a way of love, but a way of happiness too.

See what verse 9 says of the teachings that makes up this way: “they are a graceful garland for your head.”

Garlands have mostly fallen into disuse in our day, so we must ask what they were to the first readers of the Proverbs.

We find hints of the garland in the ancient world by perusing the Scriptures themselves. We find them for example in two places.

First we find something like the garland in Isaiah 61:10, which speaks of a “bridegroom” who “decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress.” I do not know the precise appearance of this headdress, but notice that it is something beautiful worn on the bridegroom’s head. It is part of the wedding attire.

And what kind of clothes do we wear in a wedding, but those which are beautiful, our very finest. We pay to rent tuxedos or vests.

And allow me to ask: What emotions are tied in our day to the thought of a wedding dress? When you think of a wedding dress, does it recall mourning? It may, but more often it will suggest one of life’s happiest

occasions. Jesus himself asked, “Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them?”<sup>2</sup>

The afternoon sun smiles on the event in our minds, with rows and rows of white chairs astride the aisle, which is strewn with rose petals. Green grass stretches into a backdrop of flowering woods, but every head turns to see the bride, clad in white, smiling an abashed but dazzling smile as she passes under the open sky to meet her beloved.

That is the thought which Proverbs gives us for this rightward path. Those are the emotions, the feelings.

We see a garland once again in the New Testament brought out by a priest of Zeus, when he attempted to sacrifice oxen to Paul and Barnabas.<sup>3</sup> He was of course lost in pagan ignorance, yet I think we find here suggested a sort of celebration. A garland, often a string or ring of leaves and flowers, came out when it was time to celebrate. Prize wisdom, Proverbs will later say, and “[s]he will place on your head a graceful garland; she will bestow on you a beautiful crown.”<sup>4</sup>

It is right for us to meditate a moment on the happiness of wisdom, of the way of Christ, as opposed to the darker path on the left.

The gang who appeal to you on the leftward path are fools, but they are clever. They know that if you see the celebration and happiness on the other path, they will never convince you to follow them—unless they can offer you something happier.

They cannot, but they don’t want you to know that.

So they offer you a fool’s gold of fake happiness.

One of the easiest examples, and one which many fall prey to in our day, is found on the college campus.

A young woman leaves home to go to college—she has developed bitterness toward the restrictions of her parents. So when they call her down the path of wisdom, she looks the other way first, to see if the other path has anything better to offer her.

And seeing that her eyes are toward them, the worldlings down the path of folly scramble to put on a false front of happiness.

They play on all the girl has hated at home: “Your parents don’t get you,” they say, “but we do. You want to taste the world and not live

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<sup>2</sup> Matt. 9:15.

<sup>3</sup> Acts 14:13.

<sup>4</sup> Prov. 4:9.

your life blind to all the fun. You don't want to end up stuffy like your parents."

Then they point toward a party. The colors are bright and everyone is laughing or smiling. "Here," they say, "is total freedom. Anything you want is yours, and no one will prevent you."

But not one college partyer has been satisfied with parties. Not one. Here is the great elephant in the room at every party—the party is never enough. The freedom is never enough.

I will borrow Isaiah's words and say, "Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?"<sup>5</sup> More than that, I can use Paul's words: "But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death."<sup>6</sup>

Our passage says the same—the fun is a façade, the path on the left leads to death.

See how the gang puts up its façade and promises so much fun in the perverted way, beginning in verse 11:

Come with us, let us lie in wait for blood;  
let us ambush the innocent without reason;  
like Sheol let us swallow them alive,  
and whole, like those who go down to the pit;  
we shall find all precious goods,  
we shall fill our houses with plunder<sup>7</sup>

But wisdom speaks and exposes the fool's gold. "My son," verse 15 begins, "do not walk in the way with them; hold back your foot from their paths." But why should you not walk that leftward path, when it glitters so brightly?

Verses 16 on:

for their feet run to evil,  
and they make haste to shed blood.  
For in vain is a net spread  
in the sight of any bird,  
but these men lie in wait for their own blood;  
they set an ambush for their own lives.

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<sup>5</sup> Is. 55:2.

<sup>6</sup> Rom. 6:21.

<sup>7</sup> Prov. 1:11-13.

Such are the ways of everyone who is greedy for unjust gain;  
it takes away the life of its possessors.

Every step on this left path stores up wrath for the walker. Yes, you may find some semblance of happiness on this path, you will find earthly pleasures no doubt. But the stolen breads of perverse pleasures will rot in your mouth, and you will find that the excess of honey makes you sick of it.

Attend the parties long enough, and you will see what many others already see—the smiles are pasted on, and are covering guilt and fear and desperation.

For not only can the left path never satisfy, but its restlessness gives way to higher and higher degrees of judgment. God may give you over to your callousness.

And in the end, when you breath your last few breaths, the whole façade will dissipate before the consuming fire before you, the expectation of judgment.

You have set the snare for your own foot by walking in this way, against the cries of those who love you most, who have watched you ruin yourself. And all the while the heart of God is grieved, the prodigal's father watches out his window with a heavy heart.

Come back, prodigal, come back! If you have wandered down the leftward path, know that Christ pursues you even now by these words. Will you not come back? Have you not had enough of this world's empty grayness? Then come to the light, walk in the Way, follow after the Son of God.

If you have any hesitation because you are ashamed, or feel you have walked too far down the foolish path, look at the red streams that cut their lines along the arid path at your feet. This stream is given for your healing, for the clearing of your guilt. Dip and wash, and you will be clean. This Christ has provided, his own blood. Wash and you will be well!

Then join the happier path with the saints of God, as we travel onward to gold and glory.

### The way of beauty

There is one final way that this rightward path recommends itself to us, and I will conclude with it. You have seen that the path of wisdom and of Christ is the way of love and the way of happiness.

But it is, finally, the way of beauty.

Back in verse 9, we are told not only that the way of wisdom is the bridegroom's garland, but also that it is the bride's jewel: they are "pendants for your neck."

In the Song of Solomon the bridegroom is dazed by the beauty of his bride's gaze, and by her pendant.<sup>8</sup>

When you leave here, you will be confronted for a week by the cleverly crafted propaganda of the world, of the left path. You will see it on the T.V., you will hear it on the radio. The gravitational pull of the world will be daily toward the leftward path, toward the rock disguised as gold, and toward death. Your own heart will recommend that way to you, in its native state of corruption.

But see the love of Christ, that he has sent me to urge you to join the resistance! Do not believe the hype—the gold is to the right!

Some might complain that Christians promote a very rigid, unbeautiful way of life. They despise art and think only of moralistic restrictions.

This is not the way of true Christianity.

The gold of the rightward path is like the bride's necklace. It cherishes beauty, for it is itself beauty.

I plead with you by the cross of Christ and the heart of God, to look again to the right. Oh that God would give you the eyes to see that love and happiness and beauty are found along this path.

And still Christ is calling to you, and urging you further and further along this path.

Come, and you will find yourself treading the path of gold.

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<sup>8</sup> Song 4:9.