

Leave Your Simple Ways, and Live Proverbs 9:1-6, 13-18

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July 12, 2026

Good morning. It's great to see all of you here this morning. If we've not met, I'm Tobias. I'm the associate pastor here at Christ the King, and Penny's away, so it's my privilege to get to open God's Word with y'all this morning. If you've been with us this summer, then you know we've been working through different topics the book of Proverbs addresses, and so over the last several weeks, we've looked at envy, and we've looked at wealth and friendship and family and anger, and this morning we come to the topic of pleasure. And not surprisingly, Proverbs has a lot to say about pleasure, and so we're going to look at lots of different passages this morning as we go, but I want to anchor us this morning in one passage that I think brings it all together, and it comes to us in two invitations in chapter 9 verses 1-6 and verses 13-18. And so let's go ahead and read those together. Chapter 9: 1-6 and 13-18. Here's the first invitation.

“Wisdom has built her house. She has hewn her seven pillars. She has slaughtered her beasts. She has mixed her wine. She has also set her table. She has sent out her young women to call from the highest places in the town. Whoever's simple, let him turn in here. To him who lacks sense, she says, come eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. Leave your simple ways and live and walk in the way of insight.”

Now here's the second invitation in verse 13.

“The woman folly is loud. She is seductive and knows nothing. She sits at the door of her house. She takes a seat on the highest places of the town, calling to those who pass by who are going straight on their way. Whoever is simple, let him turn in here. And to him who lacks sense, she says, stolen water is sweet and bread eaten in secret is pleasant. But he does not know that the dead are there and that her guests are in the depths of Sheol.”

Friends, this is the word of the Lord. Let's pray.

Oh Father, we bow before you humbled by who you are, what you've done on behalf of sinners. We are thankful, Lord, for your saving grace. We are thankful for your steadfast love and mercy. We are thankful for your word that you have given to us to instruct us, to train us in righteousness. Oh Father, we ask this morning that as we sit with this passage that you will open our eyes and our ears to what you would have us learn. We pray that your spirit will give us insight and that he will move among us as we talk about this. Oh Father, may that be so. And may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight. Oh Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

Well, a few weeks ago, my son Machen and I decided to hike Dragon's Tooth. And you just heard Caleb give that advertisement for the coming hike. This is just providential. It's just great. Anyway, we decided to hike Dragon's Tooth. It's one of the triple crowns here in Roanoke. And we camped at the top, right at the top, not at the campsite, but right up there. It was fantastic. We've been here since 2009, and it was the only one of the three that I hadn't hiked. So it was nice to be able to check that off the list. But really more than that, over the last year or so, it's become a special hike for Machen. One he's done several times and he

wanted me to enjoy. And since he's leaving for college in the fall, getting to do it with him before he goes made it an extra special experience. But I have to tell you, if you haven't hiked Dragon's Tooth, that last half mile, it's not a picnic. There are high steps, one series after another, and huge, craggy rock faces pitched at a steep angle that you have to scramble up and over while leaning hard into the side of the mountain, just so you don't fall off. And carrying an old school external frame backpack, like I do, this isn't easy, I can assure you. My my lungs were working overtime, my legs were burning, and by the time I made it to the top, I was completely soaked, drenched through and through with sweat. You'd have thought I'd fallen in the creek on the way up.

But Machen, and it truly pains me to say this, looked like he'd been on a jog around our neighborhood. His shirt was basically dry, he wasn't winded, and when he caught sight of me, he couldn't stop laughing. And I have to admit, for a split second, all I wanted to do was hurl at him that deliciously envious line from the old fella sitting out on his porch in *It's a Wonderful Life*, you remember the line? "Youth is wasted on the wrong people." But in an uncanny display of sanctification, if I do say so myself, I managed to keep my mouth shut, and I simply tried to hide my, my heavy breathing. But friends, the view up there, ridge after ridge of blue mountains framing the green valley below, it's one of the, it's one of the best views on offer here in Roanoke. Machen and I stood there a long while, and later that night, we watched the sun go down, just the two of us, all alone on that ridge, soul in sight, and it hit me right there. I was with my son, taking real pleasure in something God had made, and life was good.

Now, that experience we shared, that delight in the Lord, and His creation, and in one another, shouldn't really need defending. It wasn't just allowed, it was wanted, and yet I know that some of us were raised in circles a bit suspicious of pleasure, that it's something to be avoided as a Christian, or, or at least something to be handled with kid gloves. And so, it might surprise some of you that our own catechism highlights the goodness of pleasure in its very first question. What is the chief end of man, it asks. The answer isn't just "to glorify God," it adds "to enjoy Him forever." Penny reminded us of that answer just last week, preaching on family, and it's worth repeating. Enjoy Him, not merely obey Him, or serve Him, but we do both, but enjoy Him as the first and permanent purpose of being human. That's a thought worth sitting with, and it's a thought worth making plain right at the beginning, because after my sermons on envy and wealth, it wouldn't surprise me if you were already gearing up for another sermon of caution, and don't hear what I'm not saying. Pleasure is something for us to be cautious about, and we'll get to that, but Proverbs doesn't start there. It starts by asking where the real thing actually comes from, and how you get it.

Our passage this morning puts that question in front of us directly. Two women, two tables, the same street corner, and each one asking for your trust. So which feast is it? Who's actually feeding you? Proverbs 9 is the hinge of the entire first section of the book of Proverbs. For eight chapters, if you go back and read it, for eight chapters, wisdom and folly have been circling one another. Folly appears as this mysterious forbidden woman, but here at the end, they both step fully into the street and open with exactly the same line. Take a look at verses 4 and 16. "Whoever is simple, let him turn in here." Wisdom says it. Folly says it. It's the same address and invitation. If you were standing at that corner, and you heard the call, you wouldn't know the difference by the words alone, and that's the text's first warning, I think. Folly doesn't announce herself as deadly. She just sounds like wisdom, but there's a striking difference between what's going on between these two invitations.

Wisdom has built her house, hewn her seven pillars, slaughtered her animals, mixed her wine, set her table, and sent out her servants, all before a single guest arrives. The feast is entirely her initiative and cost. She does everything, and the guests simply arrive. Derek Kidner puts it plainly, “the guest's deficiency is their only qualification. You don't earn a seat at her table. You come with nothing but need.” But Folly just takes a seat as if she's enthroned. She presents herself as an empress who commands but doesn't serve. There's not the slightest hint that she's lifted a finger in preparation, and that makes sense. She can't prepare anything because she doesn't know anything. That's what the text says, and it's not merely that she's ignorant. The point is that she doesn't know the Lord. She's never learned wisdom the way wisdom actually comes, through fear of the Lord, which is where Proverbs teaches us, knowledge itself begins. And the worst part about it is that her ignorance doesn't stay contained to herself. It becomes her guests. Because she doesn't know the Lord, she has nothing to warn her guest with, nothing to tell him about where her table leads. So verse 18 says of him what verse 13 already said he does not know. “He doesn't know that the dead are there, that her guests are in the depths of Sheol.”

And notice too that her house is on the same high place as wisdom's. You'd expect a false invitation like this to come from somewhere shady, like a back alley, but it doesn't. Folly just steps into public space and competes openly with wisdom, but there's more to it than just competing in the open. That phrase, “high place,” it's the language kings and chronicles use again and again. It's the site where the good kings tear down and the bad kings they rebuild. It's where Israel offered worship to something other than Yahweh. Folly isn't simply setting up shop near wisdom. She's doing what every high place in Israel's history did. Behind wisdom stands Yahweh. Behind folly stand all the gods that have ever tried to lure Israel away from him. That's the image. This isn't only a choice between wise and foolish living. It's a contest over worship. And while the position of the lady's houses is significant, the setting of the invitation itself is nothing extraordinary. Did you notice that? It's just a street corner. It's ordinary life, ordinary movement. The simpleton isn't doing anything unusual. He's just walking, and both women step into that ordinary movement.

And this is the text's second warning, I think. We don't enter folly's house by charging toward it. We stumble in while we're just going somewhere. And listen to what folly offers: “Stolen water is sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant,” she says in verse 17. Proverbs doesn't flinch here. It doesn't say, and of course she's lying. It says “stolen water is sweet.” The sweetness is real, and Proverbs is right to name it. If you don't recognize how genuinely attractive folly's invitation is, you'll never understand why anyone accepts it, which frankly is everyone in this room. And so it's worth reflecting on this for a moment. You see, I think there are three ways, at least, folly turns our desires against us. The first is instinctive. Sights and sounds stir us in an instant. Something breaks through the ordinary movement of the day and catches our eye. Folly's art is the art of seduction, and she has no power over us until she awakens our desire. The same way the serpent had no power over Eve until he fixed her focus on the forbidden tree. The second is rationalizing. This is slower but more insidious. We begin by noticing, and then we start to linger until at last we convince ourselves it's not as bad as all that. It's just for a moment. I'm not really crossing a line. Each step in folly's direction is subtle, and so it feels only slightly unsettling. And it's only later, once we're inside her house and the door is closed and we're eating bread in secret, that we realize, if we ever do, whose table we're sitting at. The third one is, I think, the hardest for us to face. You see, if we're honest, there's a special delight we take in having what we know we shouldn't. Defiance is pleasurable. It's a perverted pleasure, for sure, but it's pleasurable. And Proverbs forces us to

own it. Stolen water is sweet precisely because it's stolen. The transgression is part of the appeal.

But she doesn't just promise stolen water, she promises bread eaten in secret, too. That's not the same appeal restated. It's a different one. It's not only the thrill of taking what isn't yours, it's the relief that no one else will ever know you took it. Secrecy feels safe, it feels managed, contained. That's its own seduction. It's different from defiance. And both of these promises, the thrill of what's forbidden and the safety of what's hidden, they rest on the same claim. One that Kidner catches in a line about Eve that stuck with me. "Eve had to convince Adam," he says, "that the sweetness would survive the stealing." It's a great line, but it didn't. And that's the whole point. Folly is making the same promise the serpent made. What Proverbs knows and what the simpleton standing at the corner doesn't is that pleasure doesn't last. The sweetness doesn't survive the stealing. And yet we do it anyway. Why?

Augustine knew why. Reflecting on his own captivity to sin and the confessions, he wrote this: "this woman seduced me because she found my soul outside its own door dwelling externally in the eye of my flesh." Friends, think about that image for a moment. The soul outside its own door. That's a perfect picture of vulnerability. Not actively seeking wickedness, but unmoored, living in the senses rather than the safety of our own homes. And I suspect most of us know what it is to be outside our own door before we've noticed we've left. To find ourselves somewhere we didn't intend to go, eating something we didn't mean to reach for. That's what folly is counting on. And here's what's what makes being unmoored like that so dangerous. Eating at her table doesn't just fail to fix the condition that got you there, it deepens it. We've all heard the adage, you are what you eat. But Christopher Ansboury puts the passage's central claim this way, "you become like where you eat." Which is why the text's deepest warning really isn't about any single invitation, it's about what we let form us over time. Folly's bread redirects the path, leaving us less able to tell the difference next time between what's stolen and what's given. Wisdom's bread, it does the same thing, but in the other direction. And where Proverbs is leading us is to her table, wisdom's table. One where the food is given, not taken. And tasting it costs the guest nothing at all.

She says as much herself in verses 5 and 6, look again, "come eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. Leave your simple ways and live and walk in the ways of insight." Notice the word wisdom uses for the man she's calling simple. It's the same word folly used, and yet the ways they use the word are profoundly different. Folly needs him to stay simple. Did you notice that? That's what makes him easy for her to reach. But wisdom's whole invitation is built to end the simpleness. Leave your simple ways, she says. Not come and stay who you are, leave. Her bread doesn't just fill him, it's intended to remake him. We said it earlier, you become like where you eat. That was a warning at Folly's table. But with wisdom, it's a promise. Eat long enough at wisdom's table and you stop being the kind of man that Folly can seduce. Not because you tried harder, but because the food did what it was prepared to do. It formed you. Where Folly's table ends, the dead are there. Her guests are in the depths of Sheol.

Wisdom's table ends in exactly the opposite direction. Not just with our survival, but with life and insight. Insight enough to walk in that life. And Proverbs, Proverbs told us this several chapters before. In chapter 3, listen to what it said, Blessed is the one who finds wisdom and the one who gets understanding, for the gain from her is better than gain from silver and her profit better than gold. She is more precious than jewels and nothing you desire can compare with her. Long life is in her right hand. In her left are riches and honor. Her ways are ways of

pleasantness and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her. Those who hold her fast are called blessed. All of that, all of that is beautiful, but notice especially her ways are ways of pleasantness. The Hebrew word there is *noam*, beauty, delight. It's the same root as the name Naomi, who asked people to stop calling her that when she came home from Moab with nothing but bitterness. Here, Proverbs applies the very word Naomi refused to accept to wisdom's paths.

And verse 18 pushes even further. Wisdom is a tree of life. That phrase tree of life hasn't shown up since Genesis 3. And here, the point is that wisdom's paths aren't just a delight. They're a way back. That's the point. They're a way back to unfallen, unalloyed enjoyment. Back to a pleasure we were never meant to steal or manufacture because God designed it and gave it to us from the very beginning. And yet, I think the reality is that most of us don't live there in that pleasantness. In this fallen world, we know what it means to be crushed, don't we? Proverbs does too. "A crushed spirit dries, dries up the bones," Proverbs 17:22 says. And again, in Proverbs 15:13, "by sorrow of heart the spirit is crushed." Proverbs doesn't pass over our experience of sorrow and pretend it's not there. And yet, these same Proverbs, Proverbs 17 and 15, they hand us the antidote in the very same lines. It goes on to say "a joyful heart is good medicine. A glad heart makes a cheerful face." And "the cheerful heart," it says, "has a continual feast." A continual feast. Not just joy once the affliction passes, but joy within it.

The feast wisdom promises doesn't wait for our circumstances to improve. It's a condition of our hearts. You know, a while back, a while back, one of the first movies we watched together at our movie night, Popcorn Metaphysics, was *Babette's Feast*. It's a film about a small religious community in Denmark, and this community is fraying at the edges. Old wounds have festered, unhealed beneath the surface of their piety, and underneath everything there's this pervasive joylessness. These are people who've spent their lives refusing folly, which is right. But without even knowing it, they've also been refusing wisdom's table. And into this joyless community comes Babette, a French refugee, refugee with nothing to her name. For 14 years she cooks and cleans for them, her extraordinary culinary gift kept entirely a secret, until a lottery hands her money. More money than any of them have ever seen, and she decides to spend every franc of it, about a hundred thousand dollars today, on a single dinner. And when the community learns of it, they resolve before they even sit down to eat without tasting. But then the food arrives, and despite their resolution, something happens. A general who's carried a decades-old grief to that table, he rises partway through the meal, and overcome with the joy of it all, he says what he spent his entire life refusing to believe, that holiness and happiness aren't a trade-off. Righteousness and bliss, he says, shall kiss one another. He's quoting the Psalter without knowing it.

Psalms 85 said the same thing centuries earlier, and in a different way. And around that table, following his lead, old grievances start to dissolve. People who haven't spoken in years reach across and reconcile, and when the whole thing is over, when the guests step outside into the cold night air, they stand together and sing joyfully. You see, they'd come resolved to close themselves off from pleasure. They'd arrived intending in their own way to eat in secret, but they'd found themselves feasting anyway, without quite knowing how. Friends, this is a beautiful picture of wisdom's table in chapter 9. The feast entirely the host's initiative and cost. The guests bring nothing but deficiency. And the food, the food doing what wisdom's food always does, forming them, healing them, and making them different from how they came. But you know, centuries before Babette, the prophet Isaiah spoke, already spoke of a host like that.

“Come, everyone who thirsts,” he says in Isaiah 55. “Come to the waters, and he who has no money, come buy and eat. Come buy wine and milk without money and without price.” That’s the host Proverbs 9 has been describing all along. Wisdom builds the house, prepares the feast, sends out the invitation, bears the entire cost, and she asks only that you come with nothing. Your deficiency is your qualification. That’s the logic of her feast, and it’s the only way in. But here’s something that Proverbs and Isaiah could only point toward, and what the New Testament makes clear. Wisdom has a name. Wisdom has a name.

When John opens his gospel, he draws deliberately on the language describing wisdom in Proverbs 8. In the beginning, before creation, present when the foundations were laid, and he says, that is Jesus. The eternal wisdom of God coming down from on high and into the street in a person. And what does he do when he arrives? He goes to a wedding and turns water into wine, and not a little wine, somewhere between 120 and 180 gallons. The abundance of it’s almost comical. It’s wisdom’s feast overflowing. It’s like he’s saying without a word, “look at what I have to offer you. There’s no catch. Just come and enjoy it.” And on the night before he died, he took a cup and he said, “this is my blood of the covenant, poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.” Friends, if there were ever a host who gave everything, who held nothing back, who bore the entire cost of the feast so that guests could come, could simply come, this was it. Friends, that’s what Christ did. At the cross, he gave everything. His body broke and his blood poured out so that the table could be set, so that the invitation could go out into the street. Whoever is simple, whoever comes with nothing but need, let him turn in here and feast.

But perhaps some of you here today are still a bit suspicious of pleasure. And you know, the Apostle Paul, writing to the Romans, says something that actually does sound like he’s undermining what we’ve been saying. In Romans 14.7, he says, “the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.” But friends, listen to what he’s actually doing. He’s not forbidding the feast. He’s telling us the meal was never the main point, the host was. You see, wisdom and folly both set a table, but only one of them serves it in the Spirit. And it’s only in that Spirit that Jesus’ own promise to his disciples comes true. “These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be full.” Not righteousness alone, not peace alone, but his joy in you made full. This is wisdom’s feast. This is what pleasure looks like in its proper place. And the remarkable thing is, is that there’s a greater feast still to come. Proverbs 3 already told us that wisdom’s table isn’t just about food. Wisdom is a tree of life. And in Christ, that promise is a present reality. Jesus said whoever believes already has eternal life right now. And so what’s coming isn’t a truer version of what we already have. It’s the same life consummated with nothing left in this world able to touch it.

And in John’s last vision in Revelation, we see it in full. The tree of life multiplied and standing once again, healing the nations and a wedding feast. The marriage supper of the Lamb where every tear is wiped away for good and the joy we already know will finally have no end. Bernard of Clairvaux, nearly a thousand years ago, wrote a hymn the church has been singing ever since, “Jesus, Thou Joy of Loving Hearts.” And I’d like to close with one of its stanzas: “We taste thee, O thou living bread, and long to feast upon thee still. We drink of thee, the fountainhead, and thirst our souls from thee to fill. We taste and we long for more, not the fleeting sweetness of stolen water, not the joyless duty of eating without tasting, but his joy, Christ’s joy, full in us.” That’s the invitation and it stands open to you today. Wisdom

has built the house, set the table, and borne the cost. Come, leave your simple ways and live. Let's pray.

Almighty God, what a feast. What a feast you set before us. What a host you are setting before sinners, those who are unworthy, simpletons, such food and bearing all the cost. Father, we thank you for your kindness and your graciousness. We ask, Lord, that you will help us to respond to it with thankful hearts. Keep us, Lord, from turning to folly's table. Help us to see the riches that we have in you and that are offered only by you. And we ask all this in the precious name of Jesus. Amen.