

**Beauty in the Balance**  
**Proverbs 5:15-19; 6:23-25; 11:16, 22; 30:20; 31:10, 30**  
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Many of you know that last fall my wife and I had the privilege of visiting two historic and two very beautiful European cities. The city of Paris is known to all of us. Many of you have visited and taken in the sights. You know its beauty and its charm. The second city, the city of L'viv in Ukraine, where Doug and Masha Shepherd serve as missionaries, is not so well known. Similar to Paris, it possesses its own unique character. In fact, one might argue its anonymity has helped to preserve the authenticity of its old world beauty.

After visiting both of those cities, it is easy to let the imagination go free. What would it be like to live here? Sipping coffee at quiet, street side cafés. Ambling amidst the art and antiquities in museum after museum. Learning the languages. Taking in the architecture and buildings that have stood for hundreds of years. Beauty does that to us; it draws us in. It captures our imagination. It takes us into a bigger world of wonder.

At the same time, though, we all know that life lived elsewhere is never as we imagine it. Our experience of beauty is never the whole story. One writer said it this way, "Beauty...slips through our fingers" (N. T. Wright, *Simply Christian*, p. 40). The world we live in contains beauty, but it also contains much else. In fact, when we try to seize beauty in and of itself not only does it evade our grasp it becomes dangerous, even sinister. For this reason, beauty, like every other good thing in this world must be anchored to the one who made it—that it, to God. However, we live in a world where beauty is often cut free from all such anchors. *It roams and so it ravages.* **The Proverbs make sense of this duality inherent in beauty—its drawing power and its deadly punch.**

Let's read two passages that illuminate this duality: 5:15-19 and 6:23-25

For several reasons, the story written by Norman Maclean and made famous by the 1992 movie, *A River Runs Through It*, is one of my favorites. There's the fishing thing, the Montana thing, the Presbyterian thing, the sons thing...like I said, "there's lots of reasons." The story quickly finds its bearings: a Scottish Presbyterian minister with a passion both for God and fly-fishing and his two sons, Paul who will stray and Norman who will tell the story. The story is set in Montana, which is a place awash with natural beauty—mountains, streams, wildlife and big skies. Through the lens of fly-fishing, the story also tells of beauty acquired by skill. Norman writes,

As a Scot and a Presbyterian, my father believed that man by nature was a mess and had fallen from an original state of grace....I never knew whether he believed God was a mathematician but he certainly believed God could count and that only by picking up God's rhythms were we able to regain power and beauty.

This skill, by grace, attains to art in Norman's younger brother, Paul. Paul's life was both beautiful and tragic. He was as passionate about sin as he was fly-fishing. His compulsive gambling, womanizing and unrestrained appetites finally led to his death. Though predictable, his death remained tragic. Both father and brother lamented his loss, thinking about what else they could have done to help him. Still, his life evaded their grasp. His brother writes, "If you push me far enough, all I really know is that he was a fine fisherman." His father responded, "You know more than that....He was beautiful."

This story helps us understand what all of us experience every day—beauty and tragedy pushed up right next to each other. There is a kind of glory that surrounds us and is even within us. At the same time, however, there is ugliness and distortion. Something is wrong. Something is terribly wrong. What sense are we to make of this duality?

**Main Idea:** The Proverbs lead us to understand beauty as something given by God, both external and internal realities and that which ought to be celebrated and cultivated. But by virtue of sin, beauty is commonly thought of as something in and of itself. It is cut loose from its Divine origins. When beauty is thus unhinged it becomes dangerous and evil. **For these reasons, beauty can never be denied, but nor should we seek to manipulate or exploit it. Like every good gift, we must be the stewards of beauty and seek to deepen our experience of it.**

## 1) The Presence of Beauty

The Bible unapologetically affirms that life is beautiful.

### a) We must never deny its presence

All of the passages printed on the back of the bulletin reflect the biblical view of beauty. It is real. More than that, beauty finds its highest expression in humanity, particularly in woman. The presence of beauty, though, is something that has been difficult for humanity. There have been two dominant ways that we have sought to deny beauty its rightful place.

- **Platonic perfection**

By this I refer to ancient Greek philosopher, Plato, who taught that the things in this world were imperfect copies from another world of forms or ideals, which were perfect. He taught that “this world” was really unreal. The goal of existence was to transcend the material world and ascend to the “ideal.” It doesn’t take long to realize that Plato did not take the physicality of the world very seriously.

What may not be so obvious, though, is how this view lingers even today. It is there whenever we teach our young women that they are not beautiful until they attain to some ideal image of a woman found in a magazine, one that isn’t even real because it has been electronically manipulated. This emphasis on perfection so-shrinks our view of beauty that it eventually becomes unattainable. In fact, nothing in “this world” remains beautiful because it does not rise to the “ideal” image within our minds.

The Proverbs, however, have their “feet firmly planted in this world.” They lead us to acknowledge beauty wherever it is found.

- **Moralistic narrowness**

There is another, common way we deny the presence of beauty. It is what I call “moralistic narrowness.” Platonic idealism narrows beauty to the world of the ideal. Moralistic narrowness limits beauty similarly. It is confined to what is obvious—natural beauty of the earth. The moralist often has little time for beauty even. They are much more content to live in the world facts, figures and propositions. To them “truth” is all that is important.

As a result, beauty is missed all together.

**Illustration:** The movie *Mostly Martha* illustrates this narrowness well. The woman in the movie is an excellent chef at a well-known restaurant in her city. Nevertheless, her life is devoid of joy. Though ordered, her life is lonely and her inner world is unknown. She tells her therapist, “I’m not obsessive, just precise. For her, there is not life *or beauty* outside the world she can explain and control.

**Now, what I want us to notice this morning is that there is nothing in our passages that deny or minimize the presence of beauty.** There is **nothing unreal or nothing to be held back** when it comes to the marital love that is pictured for us in chapter five. Notice; it is not depicted in a kind of calculating way. This is not the language of a textbook, but it is more akin to a novel. There is nothing of Victorian prudishness about the Bible and its celebration of marital love and beauty.

By extension, let me suggest that this celebration of sexuality and marital love is a paradigm for how we ought to relate to beauty wherever it is found in the world—natural world, architecture, art, sculpture, performing arts, literature, music, etc. Beauty is wonderful, everywhere and its presence ought never be denied.

#### **b) We must never seek to manipulate it**

At the same time, though, The Bible views beauty as something given by God. It is to be that which is safe-guarded by his Lordship. We must resist manipulating or exploiting it. For example, in chapter five the beauty and love exhibited here between a man and a woman is safe-guarded by the covenant institution of marriage. Tragically, however, when beauty's Divine origin is not acknowledged, it devolves and becomes dangerous.

This is seen in chapter six and is exhibited by the adulterer.

<sup>23</sup> For the commandment is a lamp and the teaching a light, and the reproofs of discipline are the way of life, <sup>24</sup> to preserve you from the evil woman, from the smooth tongue of the adulteress. <sup>25</sup> Do not desire **her beauty** in your heart, and do not let her capture you with her eyelashes... **Proverbs 6:23-25**

**Here, beauty is present, but it has become a commodity. It is now a possession.** It can be bought, sold and manipulated to achieve whatever end is envisioned by the owner—pleasure, wealth, power, etc. Beauty has been cut free from its giver. It is now dangerous; it is evil. Beauty, thus unhinged, is described by the well known Proverb in chapter 11,

<sup>22</sup> Like a gold ring in a pig's snout is a beautiful woman without discretion.  
**Proverbs 11:22**

This is why chapter 30 can say that “charm is deceitful and beauty is vain.”

Now, the Proverbs focus our attention on sin of the adulterer, be it a man or a woman. However, beauty, wherever it is found, if it is unhinged from its Divine origin becomes dangerous. For example, when natural beauty is not acknowledged as from the Lord, the earth is often exploited and polluted. This failure has had devastating consequences in the countries formerly dominated the old Soviet Union, which sought to eradicate belief in God.

## **2) Only Wisdom can steward and deepen the “beautiful” (11:16; 31:10; 30)**

It is only fitting that a woman be the figure who reveals beauty's depth. Proverbs 31 reveals that a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised. Why? Because the fear of the Lord is Wisdom (Proverbs 1:7; 2:5; 9:10; 14:2; 15:33). By implication, the wise woman is the most beautiful because she possesses an inner beauty. She is excellent. She is the gracious woman deserving of honor in Proverbs 11:16. This is the beauty commended by the Apostle Peter in his letter,

<sup>3</sup> Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as braided hair and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes. <sup>4</sup> Instead, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight. <sup>5</sup> For

this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to make themselves beautiful. **1 Peter 3:3-5** (NIV)

The upshot of all of this is that external beauty requires an inner beauty to steward it. This called character or becoming *real*. The aging process guarantees the loss of external beauty. So without character, nothing beautiful remains. No wonder character matters more in the end.

**But how do we get this inner beauty of character?** Now, that is a great question! It is similar to the question asked by a newly stuffed animal name Rabbit in the familiar story of *The Velveteen Rabbit*. In the story Rabbit asks the old Skin Horse how he might become REAL. Now the Skin Horse was balding and showing his seams. He had seen many toys come and eventually break. Being old, he alone knew about the “strange and wonderful” nursery magic.

“What is REAL?” asked the Rabbit. “Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle [for performance and appearance]?”

“Real isn’t how you are made,” said the Skin Horse. “It’s a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real.”

“Does it hurt?” asked the Rabbit.

“Sometimes,” said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. “When you are Real you don’t mind being hurt.”

“Does it happen all at once, like being wound up,” [Rabbit] asked, “or bit by bit?”

“It doesn’t happen all at once,” said the Skin Horse. “You become. It takes a long time. That’s why it doesn’t often happen to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don’t matter at all, because once you are Real you can’t be ugly, except to people don’t understand.”

Beautiful people are more like this soft, worn-out, stuffed animal. While we might be more quickly drawn to those bright, shiny and mechanical toys, we soon learn how easily they break. They are done before dinner on Christmas Day.

Becoming beautiful is not so much about possessing an external image as it is about being loved. Of course, the one we most need to be loved by is God himself in the person of Jesus Christ. To become beautiful, we must ourselves submit ourselves to the One who is beautiful and to the beauty of his Divine Love. Only by God’s beautiful grace does the interior of our lives begin to match the external beauty we were born with. And though our external beauty may fade, the internal beauty that forms grows and can never be lost.

<sup>18</sup> *And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. 2 Corinthians 3:18*

This word translated glory could also be translated beauty. Eugene Peterson’s translation reads, “And so we are transfigured much like the Messiah, our lives gradually becoming brighter and more beautiful as God enters our lives and we become like him.” There you have it: beauty in the balance. We become beautiful as we behold the beauty of the Lord. When we seek the face of the Lord, his grace abounds to us!