

WISDOM: LIVING SUCCESSFULLY IN A TREACHEROUS WORLD

Handling Fools

“He who walks with wise men will be wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm.”
~ *Proverbs 13:20*

Fools, Fools Everywhere

The book of Proverbs uses numerous Hebrew terms to refer to “the fool.” Each one has a slightly different nuance, but all are antithetical to “the wise man.” This broad range of terminology emphasizes the reality that in this fallen world fools will be copious and diverse. They will be found along all segments of life’s path, at all twists and turns. They will be encountered in one’s own family, in one’s community, in one’s workplace, and even as complete strangers. They will display forms of folly ranging from simple naiveté to staunch rebellion.

Kinds of Fools in the Book of Proverbs	
פְּתִי – <i>petī</i>	One who is simple, open-minded, naïve, lacking in discernment, gullible, easily misled, and vulnerable to temptation (1:4, 22, 32; 7:6-7; 11:3; 14:15; 19:25; 22:3). This is the mildest form of a fool.
כְּסִיל – <i>kēsīl</i>	One who refuses wisdom and instead deliberately makes wrong choices; he is stubborn and fixed in his ways; he makes mischief his sport (1:22; 8:5; 10:23; 13:20; 17:10, 12; 18:2).
אֲוִיל – <i>’ēwīl</i>	One who despises wisdom and discipline, is right in his own eyes and fixed in his ways; he is godless (1:7; 10:14; 12:15; 14:9; 15:5; 20:3; 27:3).
נָבָל – <i>nābāl</i>	One who has no perception of ethical and religious claims; he is vile and disgraceful (17:7; 30:22, 32).
לֵז – <i>lēš</i>	One who is proud and haughty, hardened against discipline, and sneers at God and the wise; he is a hardened scoffer and heckler (1:22; 3:34; 9:7-8; 13:1; 15:12; 19:25; 21:24; 22:10; cf. Psalm 1:1c).
אִשָּׁל – <i>’āšēl</i>	One who is lazy, a sluggard; he sleeps excessively (6:9; 26:14), is not able to provide for himself (13:4), is fearful of work (22:13; 26:13), and unteachable (26:16). The only things he has plenty of is sleep and need.
רָשָׁע – <i>rāšā’</i>	One who is wicked, who does the antithesis of righteousness; he is deceitful (10:6, 11; 11:18; 12:5), perverse (10:32), violent (12:6), cruel (12:10), envious (12:12), shameful (13:5), corrupt (17:23), and detestable to the LORD (15:8-9); he is destructive to his community, an enemy of humankind. This term is more ethical and less intellectual in nature than the previous terms.

The book of Proverbs provides **seven principles for understanding how to relate to the fools who intersect with one’s path in life**. Skill in these encounters constitutes a large part of walking successfully in this fallen world.

1. Recognize their spiritual condition.

If one is to handle a fool correctly, he must begin with a correct understanding of the fool’s condition. He must define the fool in God’s terms—not his own. A significant number of proverbs are dedicated to describing this condition. The fool’s chief characteristics include:

1. The fool places confidence in the self (12:15; 14:12; 16:2; 18:2; 21:2; 26:5; 26:12; 26:16; 28:11, 26; 30:12).
2. The fool refuses to accept correction (1:7; 9:7-8; 12:1; 15:12; 17:10; 27:22).
3. The fool flaunts sin and mocks holiness (10:23; 13:19; 14:9; 19:28; Psalm 14:1; 53:1).
4. The fool uses speech to destroy (10:14, 18; 12:18, 23; 15:2, 14; 17:7; 18:6-7, 13; 19:1; 20:3).
5. The fool rushes to anger (12:16; 14:17, 29; 17:12; 20:3; 29:9, 11; Ecclesiastes 7:9).

It would be wrong to equate foolishness with a lack of education or low social prestige. In fact, fools are abundant in the highest levels of business, government, and institutions of higher learning (see 1 Corinthians 1:18-31). Simply stated, foolishness is a *moral and spiritual state*—one which resists God and rejects His revelation. (For more on defining the fool, see “Forsaking Folly,” 9/23/2020.)

2. Resist their harmful influence.

Not only is foolishness bound up in the human heart (22:15), but it is also *contagious to others*. The folly intrinsic to a man’s own life can be greatly amplified by spending time in close proximity to others who delight in folly. Consequently, Proverbs strongly warns about the danger of associating with fools.

- **13:20; 16:29; 28:7; 29:3**

Because of this danger, Proverbs calls upon men—especially young men—to cut off close, unnecessary associations with fools. This requires vigilance and discernment regarding one’s social environment.

- **14:7; 22:5; 22:10; 22:24-25; 23:9; 24:21-22; 28:17**

It is the epitome of naiveté to underestimate the threat of ungodly influences and overestimate one’s immunity to them. Prolonged exposure to sin in relationships, social media, entertainment, and the like, desensitize a believer’s conscience to foolishness and incite him into its imitation. This is **the law of assimilation** that Proverbs articulates—that a man inevitably becomes like those to whom he devotes his time, interest, and respect.

“The path of sin is much more easily avoided than relinquished. We can far more readily keep out of the course of the stream, than stem the torrent. Walk closely with God; and under his cover and shield bear a protest against the ungodly.” —Bridges, *Proverbs*, 174

3. Confront their errant ways.

While the wise man must guard against the fool’s dangerous influences, he is not to leave the fool unchecked in his ways. Proverbs offers three reasons why fools must be corrected.

1. Fools must be corrected *out of concern for their souls* (**1:4; 1:22-23; 8:5**). Proverbs reminds us that *all* were at one time foolish (e.g., 22:15). Therefore, the invitation to wisdom—salvation through the fear of the LORD—must be extended to all. This invitation comes through wise men courageous enough to confront.
2. Fools must be corrected *because folly deserves it* (**10:13; 14:3; 18:6-7; 19:29; 26:3, 5; Ephesians 5:11-12**). Proverbs calls upon the wise to confront folly and reveal it for what it is so that wisdom would be honored. This correction always includes a verbal component, and in the case of parents or God-ordained magistrates, a corporal component as well.
3. Fools must be corrected *for the benefit of others* (**19:25; 21:11; 24:24-25**). Even when a fool does not accept the correction, others benefit from the confrontation process as they see the courageous and principled response of the wise and the depraved indifference of the fool.

Confronting foolishness will come at a cost in a world where foolishness is the norm. Certainly, it must be done carefully—with wisdom (see “Keeping Silent,” 11/11/2020, and “Speaking Truth,” 11/18/2020). But the charge to do so is unmistakable, and the reward for obedience is priceless (Matthew 5:10-12).

4. Reject their methods and presuppositions.

The hardness of the fool’s heart can tempt the wise to resort to any means possible to correct and counter the fool’s folly. But Proverbs warns against the desperation that leads one to appropriate the fool’s own methods and presuppositions to argue against him. The ends do not justify the means. Stooping to embrace the fool’s worldview and practices only shows that the wise man has been taken captive by folly.

1. Proverbs denounces the use of the fool’s *methods* in communication. In particular, Proverbs warns against using the fool’s style of quarrelling, emotional manipulation, and anger: **15:1-2, 18; 15:18; 17:14; 20:3; 21:23; 22:10; 27:3; 29:11, 22; see also 2 Timothy 2:24-26.**
2. Proverbs also denounces the use of the fool’s *presuppositions* in communication: **26:4-5.** The fool’s arguments are never “neutral.” They are the consequences of a worldview that rejects divine instruction (1:7), does not choose the fear of the LORD (1:29), and places confidence in subjective intuition and reason (12:15). It is impossible for the wise man to argue for wisdom operating from this same foundation.

Some biblical scholars have pointed to these verses (26:4-5) as a prime example of a *logical contradiction* in the Bible, arguing that these statements prove that the book of Proverbs is inspired and authoritative only to a limited extent—at best. But this is a superficial and unserious response. There are several valid ways to resolve what this apparent contradiction:

- a) Proverbs 26:4-5 speaks about *how to respond to fools speaking on different topics.*
- b) Proverbs 26:4-5 speaks about *how to respond to fools of different varieties.*
- c) *Proverbs 26:4-5 speaks about *a right and a wrong approach to correcting the same fool.*

Ultimately, the concepts of intellectual neutrality and human autonomy are myths. In any assertion about reality—about God, man, or morality—fundamental beliefs are being assumed, and these beliefs are always religious in nature (Rom 1:18-20). What the fool says and how he says it are direct consequences of his truth-suppressing worldview (Rom 1:21-22). Consequently, you cannot use a fool’s non-God-fearing methods and presuppositions (e.g., “There is no God,” Ps 10:4; 14:1; 53:1) as a shared starting point and expect to “argue up to” a God-fearing result. For the wise man to attempt this is to surrender the high ground—the fear of the LORD, which is the only foundation of knowledge and wisdom (1:7; 9:10).

5. Do not entrust them with your well-being.

Knowing the true condition of a fool, Proverbs teaches that it would be folly to trust them with one’s wellbeing. The way of wisdom is not to fear fools, envy them, trust them with resources, or delegate to them responsibilities. To do so has only negative consequences.

- **25:19; 26:6-10**

6. Do not glory in their destruction.

For some, religious devotion means responding to the words or actions of “infidels” (“fools”) with threats, imprecatory prayers, and even violence. This is not biblical wisdom. Indeed, Proverbs does recognize the relief that comes to the innocent when the wicked perish (11:10), and it is clear on the plight of evildoers (24:19-20). It nonetheless prescribes a specific manner for how the wise man is to look upon the fool and his fate.

- 1) First, one is to be quick to respond to the fool with unmerited love. This love does not remove the need for rebuke, but it does influence the motive and manner of the rebuke: **10:12; 17:9; see also Matthew 5:43-44; 1 Corinthians 13:5, 7.**
- 2) Second, one is to remember always that it is not the individual's duty to avenge; revenge is never an option: **24:29; 25:21-22; see also Romans 12:17-21 (citing Deuteronomy 32:35 and Proverbs 25:21-22).** It is the duty only of divinely established authorities to mete out retribution in response to the actions of fools: **14:35; 20:8; 20:26.**
- 3) Third, when the Lord avenges the iniquity of the fool, one is not to glory in the fool's punishment nor take advantage of his misery: **17:5; 24:17-18.**

7. Focus your efforts on the receptive.

While there is some hope for the foolish child and the naïve fool, the book of Proverbs is generally pessimistic about the possibility of helping an established fool. The wise man must realize that attempts to transform the hardened, hardened fool are largely ineffective. The wise man's time and resources are often far better spent on those who prove to be receptive to instruction.

- **9:7-9; 16:22; 17:10; 23:9; 24:7; 26:11; 29:9; Matthew 7:6**

How does one know when to *quit* trying to help the man enmeshed in folly?

1. When they are more interested in telling their story than in asking questions.
2. When they are more desirous of sympathy than growth.
3. When they want quick solutions that require minimal effort.
4. When they consistently fail to apply counsel and complete assignments.
5. When they become offended as their sin is identified.
6. When they offer excuses or shift the blame whenever confronted.
7. When they use their status as a counselee as a tool to manipulate others.
8. When they believe that meeting for counseling atones for their iniquities.
9. When they do not appear to be changing at all.

In short, fools can easily consume the time of disciplers and distract those disciplers from others who are genuinely teachable. The wise man must carefully consider his stewardship of resources and must not reward the fool's disobedience by consenting to spend unlimited amounts of time and energy on him.

For Further Reflection

- Continue to read one chapter of Proverbs each day.
- In which areas of your life do you cross paths with the foolish most frequently? Do you treat those areas with the appropriate level of vigilance? Explain how you do this.
- You have undoubtedly adopted new practices over the past year to prevent exposure to Covid-19. How do your efforts in this area compare to your efforts to avoid exposure to worldly folly?
- Interaction with fools is unavoidable. In fact, it is necessary—for their sake, for the sake of truth, and for the sake of others. What kind of a testimony do you have in your interaction with fools?
- In personal conversations or in social media, how likely are you to be drawn into frivolous or crude quarrelling? What concrete steps do you need to take to fulfill 2 Timothy 2:24-25?
- How would you explain Proverbs 26:4-5 to someone who argues that the proverbs are logically contradictory?

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Next Meeting: Apr 14 – “Pursuing Justice”