

We have some friends whose daughter dated a football player from Texas A&M. During his first trip to their home, he excused himself to use the rest room. Inside the rest room he discovered a little book of Proverbs among the reading material. This young man was unfamiliar with the scriptures but knew that his girlfriend's family was well acquainted with the Bible. After a long absence, he finally emerged. He said, "Hey Dori, have you ever read the book of Proverbs?" She said, "Yes." He replied, "Man, it's like reading a thousand Fortune cookies!"

That's a pretty good description of the book of Proverbs. Proverbs function as a creative way of making a point...many points. There are many themes in the book that were compiled as a sort of curriculum to be unpacked by a wise teacher. That's important because some Proverbs even seem contradictory. For example, Prov. 26:4-5 says,

"Answer not a fool according to his folly,
lest you be like him yourself.

Answer a fool according to his folly,
lest he be wise in his own eyes."

Which is it? Do you or do you not answer a fool according to his folly? It depends on the context and a wise teacher can help us think through when and how it is appropriate to respond to a fool.

I have been assigned the theme of "the fool" in Proverbs as if I know anything about that! I keep thinking about the sermon planning meeting where Kurt asks the group, "Who is going to address the topic of the fool?" And with one accord, they all said, "That's easy, Gary."

In all seriousness, I don't think we spend nearly enough time contemplating this subject. We are living on a ship of fools. The Greek philosopher Plato is responsible for the phrase "Ship of Fools." In *The Republic*, Plato contemplated various models of government. He warned of the danger of democracy with an allegory about passengers on a ship who didn't like the captain's direction, so they commandeered the ship even though they had no navigational training or skills. They overthrew the captain, broke open the stores and partied hearty while sailing aimlessly and dangerously into the mist. Plato was suggesting that a democracy will descend into dysfunction and chaos if everyone insists on being captain. It's true of governments, churches, families, etc.

A "ship of fools" is an apt description of mankind without a captain. We are, by nature, mutineers. We want control and we want to sail our own ship when we want, where we want and how we want. Without God's direction and leadership, it's just a matter of time before we shipwreck. The book of Proverbs warns us of the danger of foolishness by describing various kinds of fools. There are many words for "fool" in Hebrew. In fact, there are over 70 proverbs about fools and 5 different kinds of fools mentioned. We should learn to recognize them.

1. The simple fool. (peti - Strong's 6612)

This is our least foolish fool. The peti is an airhead, simply clueless. He is not innocent however. Keep in mind that Proverbs emphasizes a man's chosen outlook not his mental equipment. No fool is innocent, but this fool is not as bad as he could be. The simple is easily deceived and often gullible, and—in a fallen and sinful world—those are deadly-dangerous characteristics! He lacks discernment and has an over-simplified view of life. He is dangerously immature and intensely curious. Unscrupulous, false teachers capitalize on the simple fool.

The simple believes everything, but the prudent gives thought to his steps. One who is wise is cautious and turns away from evil, but a fool is reckless and careless.

Prov. 14:15-16

2. The self-centered fool. (ewil - Strong's 191, used 19x)

This self-centered fool has more understanding than the simple fool, but he is convinced that he is always right. We have all had interactions with people who think the only idea that's a good idea is their idea. The self-centered fool has closed his mind to wisdom.

The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man listens to advice. Pr. 12:15

A fool despises his father's instruction, but whoever heeds reproof is prudent. Pr. 15:5

This self-centered fool is like the man who lived in a small town and was always getting into everyone's business. One day he visited the town blacksmith and as soon as he walked into the shop the blacksmith thought, "Oh no. I don't have time for this guy's foolishness." The visitor walked over to a horseshoe that had recently come out of the forge and reached down to pick it up. The blacksmith started to warn him that it was hot but then he thought, no, this guy never listens to anyone. The fool picked up the horseshoe and quickly threw it down. The blacksmith said, "Hot huh?" "Nope," said the fool, "don't take me long to look at a horseshoe."

3. The stubborn fool. (kesil - Strong's 3684, used 50x)

The most common word for "fool" describes a stubborn fool who takes stupidity a step farther by refusing to learn. He just keeps returning to his foolish ways. He likes his folly. Pr. 26:11 describes this guy, ***"like a dog that returns to his vomit is a fool who repeats his folly."***

A rebuke goes deeper into a man of understanding than a hundred blows into a fool. Let a man meet a she-bear robbed of her cubs rather than a fool in his folly. Pr. 17:10, 12

Do not speak in the hearing of a fool. He will despise the good sense of your words. Pr. 23:9

4. The scoffing fool. (luwts - Strong's 3887, 17x)

Proverbs refers to this fool as a "scoffer." The scoffer is placed in contrast to the wise and coupled with one of the words for "fool" that he has earned a place on the ship of fools.

"Scoffer" is the name of the arrogant, haughty man who acts with arrogant pride." Pr. 21:24

"Drive out a scoffer, and strife will go out, and quarreling and abuse will cease." Pr. 22:10

The scoffer isn't content with his own foolish ways. He takes others down with him. Once a man becomes a scoffer, there is hardly any way back. If the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, then scoffing at God's word and God's ways is the beginning of foolishness.

We are introduced to the scoffer early in the biblical story. "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?' (Genesis 3:1). Does God really love you?"

"If you eat of the fruit, 'You will not surely die' (Genesis 3:4). God has been lying to you."

The devil is the embodiment of a scoffer. He turns simpletons into self-centered, stubborn, scoffers. The farther down the path of folly we go—from simpleton to fool to scoffer—the less we resemble God and the more we resemble Satan.

5. The senseless fool. (nabal - Strong's 5036)

This word appears only three times and describes a man who has no spiritual sensibilities. The nabal doesn't even think about the ways of God. In fact, he doesn't think about God at all. Ps. 14:1 says, "***The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no god.'***" When David wrote those words, he may have had in mind a man named Nabal, a rich man who was married to a beautiful woman named Abigail. "The man was harsh and badly behaved." 1 Sam. 25:3. When David, the newly appointed king, came into Nabal's territory, rather than honoring him and recognizing him as king, he insulted him. Abigail interceded for her husband and David did not punish him, but God did. In 1 Sam. 25:38 we read, "the Lord struck Nabal and he died."

So, how can I avoid being a fool?

1. Don't confuse wisdom with knowledge. The ship of fools is occupied by a lot of really smart, knowledgeable people. Unfortunately, a person's I.Q. does not make them immune to foolishness. Biblically speaking, the word "fool" is not an intellectual designation. Foolishness is a volitional choice. We become fools when we close our minds to God. In fact, intellectual pride can lead some individuals to reject or abandon godly wisdom and instruction—to reject the fear of the Lord. Some of the wisest people I have known had very little education. But I have lost count of the really smart people who have done incredibly foolish things. The choice to open our minds to God will lead to wisdom, but a choice to close our minds to God will lead to progressive stages of evermore dangerous foolishness.

2. Walk with the wise. "***Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm.***" **Pr. 13:20.** Don't suffer fools. Don't waste your time with the clueless fool who isn't interested in seeking truth, the self-centered fool who is always right in his own eyes, the stubborn fool who just likes to hear himself talk. Stay away from scoffers who are cynical and use sarcasm to belittle noble ideas. You cannot completely avoid people like this, they all occupy space on the ship of fools, but you can limit your exposure to them. Walk with the wise. Seek those who seek truth and want to pursue a godly path.

3. The best way to avoid being a fool is by becoming a fool - a fool for Christ. "We are fools for Christ's sake." 1 Cor. 4:10. The Corinthians were smart, well-educated, and worldly wise but many of them were fools. For that reason, Paul says, "when I came to you, brothers, I did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." 1 Cor. 2:1-2

He goes on to explain...1 Cor. 1:18-31.

Early in my Christian life I was captivated by the story of Jim Elliot. As a young man Elliot enrolled in a Bible college to prepare for work as a missionary. He even put off marriage for a few years to pursue his God-given purpose but eventually married Elizabeth and together they went to Ecuador to the work with the Quichua people. While living among the Quichua, the Elliot's heard about another tribe where there was no gospel work going on. The Aucas were a fierce and dangerous tribe. The Elliots along with 4 other young missionary couples prayed and planned and initially succeeded in making contact. The Aucas seemed to welcome the gifts that they dropped to them from a missionary aviation plane. More prayer, more planning, more gifts, finally they were ready to attempt a personal contact. A base was set up on a sand-bar on the bank of the river close to where the Auca village was located. After a couple of days three Aucas, two women and one man ventured out to meet them, and they responded positively. But could they make more contact? Could the missionaries contact the whole village? There was more prayer and planning and finally one morning, after the plane had flown over the village to try to encourage them to come to the camp on the sand-bar, a group of 10 men were seen going toward the missionary camp. Pete Fleming radioed the base, "Looks like they'll be here for the early afternoon service. Pray for us. This is the Day! Will contact you next at four-thirty." The contact never came. On that Sunday afternoon, January 8, 1956, Jim Elliot, Pete Fleming, Nate Saint, Roger Youderian and Ed McCully went radio silent. Five days later, a rescue party found their bodies in the river with Auca spears in them. They were martyred in their efforts to reach these primitive people with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The world would call this foolishness. *Life Magazine* headlines read, "Go Ye and preach the gospel.' Five do and die." Some saw the tragedy as a foolish plan hatched by some foolish young men who had a foolish belief in a God that would allow 5 men to die, 5 women to be widowed and all their children to be orphaned including one child who was born just a few weeks after her father's death. But what the world calls "foolish" God calls "the wisdom of God." The deaths of these men inspired hundreds, maybe even thousands of young men and women to follow in their footsteps. Less than three years after contact was made with the Aucas, Jim Elliot's widow, Elizabeth, along with their baby daughter, Valerie, went to live with the Aucas. God was at work in the lives of those primitive people and the deaths of those 5 missionaries led to the eternal lives of the entire Auca village. "Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men." Ultimate wisdom has been revealed in Christ. "[In] Christ are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." Colossians 2:3-4

I doubt that God is calling any of you to die as a missionary martyr in some foreign land. I do know God is calling you to serve Him where you are right now with the same commitment that Jim Elliot and those other 4 men had. Jim Elliot once wrote in his journal, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."

Are you afraid to be called a fool for Christ? The reality is we are all fools of one type or another. What type of fool are you and what type do you want to be? Are you a simple fool? A self-centered fool? A stubborn fool? A scoffing fool? A senseless fool? Or are you willing to be a wise fool, a fool for Christ. That is the kind of fool I want to be!