

Introduction: Seeing Through Antithesis

Good morning, Union Church. My name is Kyle, I'm one of the pastors here, and it's my privilege to open up the Word of God with you this morning.

Sometimes it's easiest to learn how to do something by learning what not to do. Have any of you ever experienced that? Sometimes it's really difficult to explain what something is positively, and the best way to do that is to explain what it isn't.

For example, this is true of a lot of social cues. What is appropriate in certain social settings? Well, it's *not* asking a woman if she's pregnant, even if you *really* think that she is. What is proper attire to a business casual wedding? Well, it's not a Tuxedo t-shirt, even if Tuxedo is in the name.

Some things are just easier to learn by learning what *they're not*. Wisdom is a little like that.

We've been in a series on Wisdom over the last several weeks as a church, looking at the books of Wisdom literature in the middle of the Old Testaments in our Bibles. And we've entered into this series because we are convinced that our culture is in desperate need of what the Bible calls *wisdom*. All of us want to flourish, want to live well—yet so many of us feel an acute sense, perhaps a gnawing anxiety—that we're not.

In our world today, we see angry division, countless gurus and life coaches with contrasting advice, we see a lack of clear purpose. We see a culture that despite its vast wealth and comfort has not been able to define and model a life well-lived. And so, we need the God who created the world and is the one who designed flourishing to give us direction, to equip us with wisdom that can healthily navigate complex situations, make wise decisions, and live in confidence and peace.

But today, we're taking a bit of a pivot, because today we're not merely talking about wisdom itself, but wisdom's antithesis: Foolishness. Because like so many other complex things in life, sometimes it's easiest to learn what wisdom is by learning what it's not.

If we are going to be wise people, we need to understand what a fool is. So, that's what we're going to aim to do today. But before we do that, let's pray.

II. Proverbs' Strength: The Diversity of Fools

Okay, so the first thing we're going to see here this morning is that one of strengths of the book of Proverbs' is that it paints a vivid picture of *A Diversity of Fools*.

Foolishness has different types, different temperaments. And one of the ways that Proverbs helps us understand these different kinds of fools is by naming them. Fool, simple, sluggard, scoffer, sinner. There are at least five different kinds of fools that are described all throughout Proverbs, so we're going to run through them.

The first name used for the fool is, quite simply, the fool. You see it first used in the seventh verse of Proverbs 1: **“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.”**

In most modern translations the word “fool” appears nearly 70 times. It's actually three different, but related words in Hebrew. And because this is kind of the “generic” term for fool, you can see, in Proverbs, a lot of different foolish characteristics attached to this label. But, if there is one common denominator amongst all three Hebrew words, amongst most instances in our English translations, it would be this: The fool is *stubborn*. Obstinate. One Proverbs scholar, Derek Kidner describes the fool as “dull and obstinate... stupid and stubborn... boorish.”¹

And in particular, the thing that the fool is stubborn about is his foolishness.

Proverbs 12:15 – **“The way of the fool is wise in his own eyes, but a wise man listens to advice.”** Or Proverbs 28:26 – **“Whoever trusts in his own mind is a fool.”**

The reason fools are stubborn is because they are completely convinced that they are right. They need no correction. Proverbs 17:10 – **“A rebuke goes deeper into a man of understanding than a hundred blows into a fool.”** Rebuke, correction, is just completely ignored by the fool, like the man who keeps touching the hot stove because the nerve endings of his fingers were deadened long ago.

The stubborn fool is described several times as “babbling”—because the stubborn fool loves to hear himself talk and hates to listen. Why would he listen, he knows everything already? **“A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing his opinion.” – Proverbs 18:2.** Ouch.

The fool is marked by stubbornness. And this stubbornness is shared by every type of fool. The sluggard is stubborn in her laziness, the simple is stubborn in his naivete, the scoffer is stubborn in her cruelty, the sinner is stubborn in his love for wickedness.

¹ Derek Kidner, *Proverbs: Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries* (London: The Tyndale Press, 1964), 40-41.

But, in its isolated form, each of us knows—and probably have been—the stubborn fool who loves to hear himself talk, hates to listen, and assumes that whatever his inclination is *must* be the wisest course of action. This is the first type of fool.

Now, the second name for a fool is the simple. You see it first in Proverbs 1:22 – **“How long, o simple ones, will you love being simple?”** You see the name “simple” used 15 times throughout Proverbs, but you also see parallel phrases, like **“him who lacks sense” (9:16).**

To be simple is to lack sense. But it’s not merely to be dumb. It’s not to be unsophisticated intellectually. It is a word that basically means to be childish. To be simple is to hold on to a child’s way of viewing life, way of making decisions, way of interacting with the world—when you’re no longer a child. And so, you can have very smart, very modern, sophisticated individuals who are filled with childishness.

Now, let me give you a few examples of what this looks like in Proverbs. Proverbs 22:3 - **“The prudent sees danger and hides himself, but the simple go on and suffer for it.”**

Like a child who doesn’t look before she crosses the street, the simple keep going down their path of destruction without a second thought. Someone may yell a warning as they are headed toward a busy highway, but they just blindly ignore it.

And the reason they ignore correction is because they have no depth. They’re thoughtless, rootless. All they know is what sounds good, feels good, tastes good in the moment—and that’s what they go after—like a child chasing a bright balloon off the side of a cliff.

Listen to how this plays out in other Proverbs:

“The simple believes everything, but the prudent gives thought to his steps.” – Proverbs 14:15. The simple don’t think through what they are told, they just believe whoever speaks the loudest, whoever’s presentation is the slickest. Oh, so much of the content of our world is aimed at the simple.

Our culture is so dependent on loud and flashy and quick transitions between dopamine hits—and it’s training us to be simple. The world we live in is training us to have short attentions spans, not to focus deeply on one thing at a time. And what that does is it trains us to have a simple appetite. The simple is someone who still only eats bread and candy—even at 36—because they haven’t developed the taste for richer flavors and the sense to know your body needs nutrients—so they just feast on the easy, the sweet things.

In Proverbs 9, the lady Folly calls out to the simple youths walking down the street, inviting them into her house. And this is what she says: **“Stolen water is sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant!”** And it works. The simple don’t see death waiting behind her doors.

All Folly has to say to the simple is: What I have is sweet. It’s shiny. It’s pleasant. She knows the simple will not think twice. They’ll see an immediate gratification and they will run to it like moths to a flame.

And this is not just talking about food! It’s talking about all of life! It’s talking about people who are content to stay in the junk food aisle of life, having no regard to how it’s crippling them. It’s the man who doesn’t ever build something meaningful, because they’ve been trained to consume, consume, consume. It’s the amateur pundit that echoes the cries of the loudest crowd—or the most familiar crowd—on every issue without ever taking time to think deeply about the complexities of life. The simple don’t stay in a friendship, or a church, long enough to be vulnerable, because they go where it’s easy.

Maybe that’s actually the most devastating critique of the simple: They don’t stay. They have no patience. Proverbs 1:32 – **“The simple are killed by their turning away...”** In the context here, wisdom is a way that you walk, and the simple, at least some times, find the way! They find the way of wisdom, they start to walk down the path, but then they turn away—to a new shiny thing.

Eugene Peterson once wrote a book called *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, and his thesis was essentially that the way to flourish, to live well as a disciple of Christ was to live faithfully in the ordinary over time, to have the Christian postures and practices form us over time, “long obedience in the same direction”.

But, the simple have no stamina for that. Like a toddler that quickly grows bored with his toys, new, easy things always calls out to the simple. A new hobby replaces a small group. The new show takes priority over discipling the children. A new guru, a new diet, a new program to create, a new path to forge that seems so much more exciting than the old, well-worn path of prayer, Bible reading, church, repentance, faith. The simple can never stay, and so they turn away—again and again. That’s the simple.

Another kind of fool that Proverbs describes is the sluggard.

Proverbs 6:9 says **“How long will you lie there, O sluggard? When will you arise from your sleep? A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come upon you like a robber, and want like an armed man.”**

I like to think of the sluggard as the inverse of the simple. The sluggard aren't ignorant of the deeper things, in their head they want the deeper things, but they're constantly drawn away: Not by attraction to the other, shiny thing, but by aversion to hard, difficult striving. They are averse to any kind of discomfort. The simple can't even see the deeper things, the sluggard can see it initially, but then fall back in dread of the smallest risk or pain.

That's why the Proverbs exhorts the sluggard like this: **“Go to the ant, O sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise. Without having any chief, officer, or ruler, she prepares her bread in summer and gathers her food in the harvest.”**

For the sluggard to do something hard, he has to have an authority that will threaten even greater discomfort than the discomfort of work. A ruler, an officer, a chief that will bring the hammer down if the work isn't done.

But the problem is, that usually doesn't last. Because if the threat isn't right in front of him, the sluggard will find some discomfort, some risk, some threat to avoid in the immediate.

Proverbs 22:13 says **“The sluggard says, ‘There is a lion outside! I shall be killed in the streets!’”** Maybe the lion is real, maybe he's made up the risk in his head. That's not the point. The point is that the sluggard avoids doing the hard thing, because the risk of discomfort, of pain, of *hard* is too great. He's not seeking thrills, he's avoiding risk—and if you call him on it, he'll have excuses ready. His god is not pleasure but comfort.

But the thing is, because he's so hell-bent on avoiding risk, he compromises. **A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest.** That's all. He's not avoiding obedience and responsibility forever—just for a little longer. If deep, rich Christian life is “long obedience in the same direction,” one pastor characterized the sluggard as one who makes “small surrenders in the wrong direction.”²

Maybe this is linked to a particular sin struggle or addiction. You know that killing that sin, that addiction, would be a good thing, but you never make it past the first day or two of withdrawal. Maybe it's the spiritual discipline that you know you should engage with, but you never even start because it seems so daunting. Maybe you just know that you should have a hard conversation with somebody, but you're constantly avoiding it, putting it off—I'll call her tomorrow. I'll tell them about Jesus next time. A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands. Small surrenders in the wrong direction—and before you know it, you are miles from where you wanted to be. That's the sluggard.

² Jamin Roller, “The Simple, the Sluggard and the Scoffer,” <https://citizenschurch.com/resources/sermon/782>.

Another kind of fool that Proverbs describes is the scoffer. **“Scoffer is the name of the arrogant, haughty man who acts with arrogant pride”** Proverbs 21:24.

Pride, of course, is at the root of all kinds of foolishness. None of these types of fools are without pride. Wisdom is the posture of humility, so all foolishness involves some kind of pride. But scoffers *embody* pride. They are pride incarnate.

And they are a particular kind of pride.

The end of verse 24 says that the scoffer acts **“with arrogant pride.”** In Hebrew, that word for “arrogant” is most often translated “wrath” in the Old Testament. The scoffer is not merely proud. The scoffer is *furiously* proud. They are not merely self-centered themselves, but they expect others to be centered on them as well.

This is pride that is particularly prone to comparison—which is why it’s translated not only as “scoffer” but “mock”. The scoffer scoffs at people. He scorns people. She mocks people—because in her insecurity she cannot stand the thought of being inferior.

In its smallest, modern form, perhaps the scoffer would be a cynic. Refusing to believe in anything and looking down on others for doing so themselves. Their cynicism allows them to feel superior: “You really think that will change? How naïve. You really believe that old garbage?” Scoff. Scorn. Mock.

But scoffing quickly turns from haughty indifference to destructive wrath.

C.S. Lewis says that pride is essentially competitive. He says: if you are annoyed that somebody wants to be the center of attention, it’s likely because you—even a small part of you—wanted to be the center.³ And when you’re not the center, anger sprouts.

Rejection—or something interpreted as rejection—seeds bitterness and stewing in the scoffer. Not being appreciated plants indignation and resentment. Soon we start ascribing the worst motives to the other person, and the bitterness and resentment festers and grows into malice.

Other forms of foolishness try to avoid correction, or ignore warnings, or give excuses. The scoffer responds to correction with *fury*. Who are you to judge me?

“Whoever corrects a scoffer gets himself abuse.” – Proverbs 9:7

“Do not reprove a scoffer, or he will hate you.” – Proverbs 9:8

³ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 123.

“Scoffers set a city—or a church, or a family, or a company—aflake.” – Proverbs 29:8

“Drive out a scoffer, and strife will go out, and quarreling and abuse will cease.” – Proverbs 22:10

Where the angry, furious prideful scoffer goes, there goes abuse, there goes people walking on eggshells, there goes fighting and tension and ruthlessness. It is a particularly toxic, destructive form of foolishness. And it is most destructive when the scoffer encounters God.

Lewis, again, says that pride is the complete “anti-God” state of mind.⁴ He says pride *is* fundamentally enmity with God—and it keeps us from knowing him. This is what he says:

“[God is] something which is in every respect immeasurably superior to [you]. Unless you know God as that—and therefore know yourself as nothing in comparison—you do not know God at all. As long as you are proud, you cannot know God. A proud man is always looking down on things and people, and of course, as long as you are looking down, you cannot see something that is above you.”

And so, Lewis says, if you are trapped in this destructive pride, any worship that you think you are giving to God is just made up, it’s fake worship to an imaginary God. He says:

“[The proud] theoretically admit themselves to be nothing in the presence of... God, but are really all the time imagining how He approves of them and thinks them far better than ordinary people... they pay a penny’s worth of imaginary humility toward God and get a pound’s worth of Pride towards their fellow men in return.”

The scoffer hates the real God because it would make him low. And he hates to be reminded of his lowliness. And so, the scoffer is utterly destructive both to himself and the people around him.

There is one last name used to describe fools in Proverbs: The Sinner. The Wicked.

The sinner, the wicked are those who have succumbed to their foolishness such to the degree that their sin is no longer reluctant, but they are eager and willing to abide in the darkness. The wicked have come to *love* their foolishness so much that they **“run to**

⁴ Lewis, 123.

evil” (Prov. 1:16). Proverbs 2:12-15 says that they “rejoice in doing evil... delight in the perverseness of evil”.

And they not only delight in their own evil, but they love to drag others down into it. Proverbs 4:16 says that they **“cannot sleep unless they have done wrong... unless they have made someone stumble.”**

Wickedness, like misery, loves company.

The thing I want you to see here is that this is the end result of all foolishness. Foolishness leads to wickedness. The foolish—whether they believe it or not—become wicked. To use a phrase we used at the beginning of this series: Wisdom has a moral dimension. Foolishness and sin are different words for the same attitudes and actions.

That’s why the narrator of Proverbs, who is primarily aimed at forming the reader to be wise is so often warning the reader: **“Do not let the wicked entice you!”** (Prov. 1:10). Because embracing foolishness and being tempted by wickedness are fundamentally the same thing. They both are antithetical to wisdom, they both are outside of God’s moral desires for the people made in his image, and they both lead to death.

Proverbs 10 says that even the wicked’s gain ultimately leads to more sin (10:16) and that eventually, their name will rot (10:7) and they will be cut off from God’s blessings (10:30-31). And in the same chapter, Solomon says: the fool will come to ruin (10:10), cause sorrow and shame for his family (10:1,10:5), and die for his lack of sense (10:21).

III. Our Problem: The Conviction of Fools

Foolishness is complex and layered. There are many different types of fools, which Proverbs does an excellent job of illuminating—yet ultimately it all leads to the same place.

Which *should* leave us trembling.

Maybe you’ve been sitting here and hearing about the lazy sluggard, the stubborn fool, the naïve simple, the abusive scoffer—and you’ve got people in your mind. Maybe it’s your spouse, maybe a neighbor, co-worker. Maybe it’s a made-up person, the amalgamation of all that you imagine the worldly person of our modern culture to be.

But what I think we all need to sit in this morning is how poignantly Proverbs describes *us*. Where is foolishness in your life? I don't know how you can read these verses and not feel the sting of the Spirit's conviction.

At least, that has been my experience this week.

It's so easy for me to read some of these verses at a surface level and think: "Oh, I know who needs to hear this!" But one of the benefits—and curses—of preaching is that it forces you to think beyond the surface. And as soon as I spend five minutes thinking about these fools, I begin to realize: I'm a fool!

I have been so, so stubborn. So sure my first inclinations are, failing to listen and just waiting for my turn to talk. Oh, how often have I babbled on and on, failing to see what's in front of me for the love of my own voice.

And my desires are so simple. Every morning there is a flashing light in my brain that says: "You need to see the most recent email! What deals does Amazon have today?" I've been doing regular devotions for years, and yet every morning I still feel ruled by my desire for something sweet.

It's so easy to say: "Just a little Instagram. Just a little purchase outside my budget. Just a little impatient outburst at my toddler." Because I hate discomfort. The discipline that leads to wise instincts is so hard. Oh, the sluggard in me is so tenacious, it seems like no matter how hard I try to kill my lazy flesh, it rises up somewhere else.

I have been viciously proud. Maybe not to someone's face, but I have harbored vitriol toward those who I thought didn't appreciate me. I have dismissed the thoughts and ideas of those who weren't as clever as I—and missed out in the process.

And I have loved evil. I have loved sin. I have been secretly glad when I've heard of others' struggles. I have run to vices again and again, with no regard for the long-term damage I was doing to myself and others.

I have been a fool, and a wicked one at that. And I have felt the consequences. Relationships broken. Years wasted. Endeavors failed. And judgment looming. I have felt the consequences, and I am terrified of more to come.

What kind of foolishness lingers here? Certainly foolishness *rages* outside if these walls—but you will fool yourself if you think you can live in this foolish world without becoming one yourself.

Proverbs has a great strength: Showing us the wide diversity of foolishness, that we might avoid it. But we have a great weakness: We cannot avoid it. Try as we might, we

are the fool. It's really just a question of what kind of foolishness we most naturally slip into: Stubbornness? Simple naivete? Laziness? Hateful scoffing? Just loving sin? What kind of fool are you? What kind of consequences have already come? What awaits if your foolishness continues?

Of course, the question is, what do we do now? What do we do with that foolishness? We could leave here and strive to do better, to seek the path of wisdom. But my guess is that were we to just leave here hearing, "You're a fool, stop it!", then what would happen is that we may fiercely resolve to leave foolishness behind and walk the path of wisdom—but like the simple we'd turn away distracted in a day, a month, a year. Like the sluggard, we'll fall into the habit of making small surrenders in the wrong direction and find ourselves right back here before you know it.

We need something more than just effort.

IV. Jesus's Wisdom: The Hope for Fools

Which is why we cannot leave here without talking about the gospel. Because the good news of the Bible is that while all of us are fools, in Jesus Christ there is hope for fools.

In 1 Corinthians 1, the apostle Paul says: **"The word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God"** (1 Cor. 1:18). He goes on to say: **"... the world did not know God through wisdom, [so] it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles."**

The message and life of Jesus Christ is folly to the world. It's foolishness. Why?

Well, because he died. And in particular, he died a fool's death. Only fools got themselves crucified. Only the shameful got hung on a cross.

Imagine you went into the Areopagus in Greece and told the people:

"I know the greatest, wisest teacher who ever lived, come, hear his teaching and become wise!" And they asked: "What happened to this wise teacher?"

Well, he died. “Well, I suppose that’s to be expected. Socrates, Plato, Aristotle they all died eventually. Father Time is undefeated!”

Well, no, he was actually quite young. He was crucified, over in Israel. “Ah, leading a revolution, huh? Got into the crosshairs of the empire?”

“Well, kind of. The Romans actually didn’t really want to crucify him, but his Jewish countrymen stirred up a mob that insisted on it.”

Wow! But, wait, what about his followers? Surely a teacher like this would have had quite the following. How violent was the resistance?” His closest followers actually all abandoned him.

“Wait, so you’re telling me that this wisest person who ever lived, wisdom personified, got himself betrayed by his countrymen, abandoned by his followers, and shamefully crucified by a Roman government that couldn’t have cared less about him? This is the wisdom you want us to learn from?”

Wisdom is supposed to lead to flourishing—not flogging! It’s supposed to lead to the good life, not a shameful death! This man doesn’t seem wise, he seems a fool!

And that’s the point. In the eyes of the world, he became a fool—to take a fool’s death—so that the fool might be forgiven. Though he had never been a stubborn fool, a simpleton, a sluggard, a scoffer, a wicked man—he took the blows of the fools, the accusations of the simple mob, he submitted himself to Pilate who just wanted to avoid the hard thing, he endured the scoffing of the Pharisees, and he died, in the place of the wicked. Every just and right consequence the fool was meant to receive, he took so the fool could be forgiven.

Friends, this is our only hope. The hope isn’t that we would stop being fools so God would accept us. The hope is what Paul wrote in Romans 5:8 – “**While we were yet sinners**—while we were yet fools—**Christ died for us.**” And he didn’t only die, he also rose to life! And because he is alive, now he can invite the fool to walk the path of wisdom with him.

Think about Peter, the epitome of the stubborn fool. Jesus told the disciples: You all will abandon me, and Peter said: “Not I, Lord! The rest may leave you, but I will never do so.” And Jesus said, before the night is over you will not merely abandon me but deny me, not once, but three times.

And after Jesus rose from the grave, and appeared to Peter and the other disciples, he said “Simon, son of John: Do you love me?” And Peter said: “Lord, you know I love you.”

And Jesus didn't say: "Are you sure? Because around the fire that night, it sure seemed like you loved comfort and reputation and ease more than you loved me." No, what did he say? "Feed my sheep." Three times Jesus asked him, and three times he invited Peter back to wisdom, back to humility, back to fearing God and loving God's people.

What about Paul? Paul who had been the epitome of the hateful scoffer who breathed out murder and rage in his arrogance, who delighted in Steven's stoning, who lashed out at those who had the audacity to challenge the Pharisees' narrative. What did Jesus do when he met Paul on the Damascus road?

Well, first he humbled him. He knocked him down, revealed to him the blindness of his pride. But then, he sent his servant, Ananias. And Ananias came to Saul in the room on Straight Street and he said: "**Brother Saul.**" Brother! The scoffer, the murderer, the abuser, the wicked is called "Brother." And Ananias continues and says: **The Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.**" And Acts 9:18 says "**immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized.**" And he became the greatest church planter in history.

First, Jesus humbled Paul, but then he healed him. And invited him to the path of wisdom.

Friends, we have been foolish. So, so foolish.

But in Proverbs 8:34, Wisdom says "**Whoever finds me finds life and obtains favor from the Lord!**" But in Christ, you have not found Wisdom, Wisdom has found you. He's found you despite your foolishness, despite your failure, despite your wickedness. And now he invites you back to the path of wisdom. To the path of humility. To build something meaningful and lasting. To be wise, and to find life.

Would you go to him?