

WISDOM: LIVING SUCCESSFULLY IN A TREACHEROUS WORLD
Forsaking Folly

**“How long, O naive ones, will you love being simple-minded?
And scoffers delight themselves in scoffing and fools hate knowledge?” ~ Proverbs 1:22**

The Pandemic of Folly

Since the purpose of the book of Proverbs is to convey *wisdom*, it is natural that many of its teachings deal with wisdom’s antithesis—*foolishness*. **Proverbs treats foolishness as mankind’s greatest enemy.** It is man’s most lethal disease. He is already infected with it by the time he is born. Wisdom—“the fear of God” (Prov 1:7)—is the only antidote.

The pervasiveness of foolishness is evidenced in the multitude of terms Proverbs uses to describe it. The main ones include:

- 1) **The “naïve” or “simple”** (e.g., “How long, O naïve ones, will you love being simple-minded,” 1:22a). The Hebrew term *peti* is found 14x in Proverbs. It is the mildest of the terms. It describes those who are easily misled, gullible, and susceptible to influences of every sort (8:5; 9:4, 16; 14:15). The proverbs of Proverbs were aimed directly at those in this category (1:1-4), and wisdom specifically calls out to them (9:4, 16). There is yet hope for their souls (1:4; 19:25; 21:11).
- 2) **The “fool” or “idiot”** (e.g., “Fools despise wisdom and instruction,” 1:7b; “The complacency of fools will destroy them,” 1:32). Two Hebrew terms, *’ewil* (used 19x) and *kesil* (used 49x), are used for this category, and refer to those with irrational thinking and immoral character. “They are blockheads because, deaf to wisdom, from their distorted moral vision, of which they are cocksure, they delight in twisting values that benefit the community” (Waltke, *Proverbs 1-15*, 112). They consciously reject wisdom’s invitation.
- 3) **The “wicked”** (e.g., “The way of the wicked is like darkness; they do not know over what they stumble,” 4:19). The Hebrew term *rasha’* is translated as “wicked one” and stands in direct antithesis to the “righteous” one (*tzaddiq*). According to Proverbs, those who are “wicked” are those who shamelessly promote evil thoughts, words, and deeds, and whose actions bring chaos and upheaval to those around them (e.g., 10:6-7, 11, 32; 11:11). The LORD detests them (15:8, 28).
- 4) **The “treacherous”** (e.g., “From the fruit of a man’s mouth he enjoys good, but the desire of the treacherous is violence,” 13:2). The “treacherous” are the *apostates*. They are unfaithful to the relationship God has established with His people. They “leave the paths of uprightness to walk in the ways of darkness” (2:13). As a result of their covenant treachery, Proverbs describes their way as hard (13:15) and they will eventually be cast out and destroyed (2:22; 11:3, 6).
- 5) **The “mockers” or “scoffer”** (“A wise son *accepts his father’s discipline*, but a scoffer does not listen to rebuke,” 13:1). The Hebrew term *letz*, translated as “scoffer,” is the most arrogant and hardened of all fools (15:12; 21:24). He is antagonistic to reproof (9:7-8; 13:1), and must only be driven out of the community (22:10). He exhibits open contempt for the ways of God. “No man earns more universal detestation or deserves it more than he who wears a perpetual sneer, who is himself incapable of deep loyalty and reverence and who supposes that it is his mission in life to promote the corrosion of the values by which individuals and society lives” (McKane, *Proverbs*, 399).

By surveying the proverbs in which these terms are used, we can identify at least **nine characteristics about folly**. Some fools manifest only a few of these characteristics. Others manifest all nine.

1. Folly is man's natural inclination.

Man is born neither good nor innocent. The desires of his heart from the very beginning are marked by foolishness:

- **22:15** – “Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child; the rod of discipline will remove it far from him.”

Solomon describes the child's heart—the mission control center of life—as being “bound up” or entangled with “foolishness.” This foolishness is not mere naivete or immaturity. It is a moral and intellectual defect that is best described as “stupidity.”

Solomon debunks “conventional wisdom” that contends that children are born innocent and only become fools if exposed to a bad environment. Solomon affirms that every child is living proof of the reality of **original sin** (Gen 3) and its consequence of **radical depravity** (Gen 6:5). Apart from the conscious forsaking of this natural, ingrained folly, and a deliberate turn to embrace “the fear of the LORD” (Prov 1:7), a child will forever remain a fool (e.g., 29:15).

“What parent, what instructor of children, will not bear sad but decisive testimony to the foolishness of the child? . . . Foolishness is the birthright of all.” ~ Bridges, *Proverbs*, 413

2. Folly places confidence in self.

The battle between wisdom and foolishness is a battle over the location of authority. The repentant wise man looks to “the LORD” as his ultimate authority (see 1:7; 9:10). The natural man looks to himself.

- **12:15** – “The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man is he who listens to counsel.”
- **14:12; 16:2; 18:2; 21:2; 26:5; 26:12; 26:16; 28:11, 26; 30:12**

The phrase “**his own**” is commonly found describing the attitude of the fool: (a) “his own eyes” (3:7; 12:15; 21:2; 26:5, 12, 16; 28:11; 30:12); (b) “his own mind/heart” (18:2; 28:26); (c) “his own understanding” (3:5); (d) “his own sight” (16:2). These things—all aspects of *self*—identify the fool's ultimate authority. Whether acknowledged or not, the fool relies on himself as the ultimate judge.

Solomon teaches that fools can be identified by their optimistic view of self, their affirmation of their own opinions, their low view of external authorities, and their lack of interest in learning from anyone. Contrast this attitude with **Proverbs 3:5-7** – “Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight. Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and turn away from evil.”

3. Folly refuses to heed correction.

Since the fool is characterized by self-sufficiency, he is **extremely difficult to teach**. He habitually reacts to correction with defensiveness, blame-shifting, and self-justification.

- **12:1** – “Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge, but he who hates reproof is stupid.”
- **17:10** – “A rebuke goes deeper into one who has understanding than a hundred blows into a fool.”
- **27:22** – “Though you pound a fool in a mortar with a pestle along with crushed grain, *yet* his foolishness will not depart from him.”

Fools are not foolish because they lack an education. Fools are foolish because they do not recognize the value of wisdom and have no desire to pursue it. They are the “snowflakes” of society—deeply offended when admonished, demanding “safe spaces” to hear only their own voices, responding to correction with profanity, aggression, and violence. As Solomon states, they are like “stupid” or “brutish” (12:1a).

Fools live in self-deception—the illusion of mastery. They believe they have mastered knowledge and wisdom but in reality, they are blind to their ignorance, calling “foolishness” “wisdom,” and “wisdom” “foolishness” (see 1 Cor 1:18-25).

“He is surely a *brute*, and not a rational creature, who has swallowed poison, and will rather suffer it to take its course, than admit the necessary relief of medicine, lest he should be obliged to confess his folly, in exposing himself to the need of it.” ~ Bridges, *Proverbs*, 131-32

4. Folly rejects cause-and-effect.

One of the primary characteristics of foolishness is the pursuit of short-term pleasure despite its long-term consequences.

- Contrast the long-term, deadly consequences with the short-term appeal of the **adulteress** in **7:6-27**. “Her house is the way to Sheol, descending into the chambers of death” (7:27).
- Contrast the long-term consequences with the short-term appeal of **wine** in **23:29-35**. “At the last it bites like a serpent and stings like a viper” (23:32).

Folly is the great deceiver. It always promises far more than it can deliver. The foolish reject this reality and the *cause-and-effect* nature of their decisions. They mock the virtue of *delayed gratification* and instead establish their way according to what brings *immediate pleasure*, regardless of the cost. They believe they can delay or evade the payment necessary for this enjoyment, but eventually the bill comes due, resulting in material, moral, and spiritual bankruptcy.

5. Folly flaunts sin and mocks holiness.

Fools are those who take sin out of the shadows and into the mainstream. They promote their sin in public without any sign of embarrassment or shame:

- **10:23** – “Doing wickedness is like sport to a fool, and *so is* wisdom to a man of understanding.”
- **13:16** – “Every prudent man acts with knowledge, but a fool displays [*lit.* spreads out] folly.”
- **14:9** – “Fools mock at sin, but among the upright there is good will.”

Furthermore, they ridicule the pursuit of holiness and make it their mission to oppose it:

- **13:19** – “Desire realized is sweet to the soul, but it is an abomination to fools to turn away from evil.”
- **19:28** – “A rascally witness makes a mockery of justice, and the mouth of the wicked spreads iniquity.”

Folly finds entertainment and delight in the expression of folly. The greater the number of participants, the better. Fools delight when wickedness achieves victory, when sin triumphs, when laws are broken, and when chaos reigns. At the same time, they mock the sensitive conscience, scoff at the confession of sin, and ridicule efforts to avoid temptation.

“What gives pleasure is a good indication of character.” ~ Clifford, *Proverbs*, 116

6. Folly speaks destructively.

Proverbs draws a tight connection between *folly* and *speech*. A heart bound with foolishness will manifest itself through the mouth.

- 10:14, 18; 12:18, 23; 15:2, 14; 17:7; 18:6-7, 13; 19:1; 20:3

The speech of the foolish is particularly manifested by speaking rashly, profusely, without listening, sarcastically, cynically, and destructively.

7. Folly rushes to anger.

Proverbs also draws a tight connection between *folly* and *anger*. Fools are hotheads known for their outbursts of anger.

- 12:16; 14:17, 29; 17:12; 20:3; 29:11; Ecclesiastes 7:9

It is interesting to note that in Paul's list of "deeds of the flesh" in Galatians 5:19-21, about half of these "deeds" are associated with various forms of anger. Indeed, anger is the tool of the fool's trade.

8. Folly reaps judgment.

The law of cause-and-effect cannot be negated. The fool will reap what he sowed. A life dedicated to folly and its fruits will receive judgment in return—punishment in this life, at the end of this life, and in the life to come. The wages of folly is death.

- 1:27-32; 10:8, 10, 13, 21; 14:1, 3; 18:7; 19:3, 29; 26:3

9. Folly spreads grief.

The consequences of folly are never limited to the fool himself. What makes folly so destructive and painful is its ability to spread its consequences onto those within his circle of life. Folly always results in collateral damage. It brings grief—even to the innocent.

- 10:1b; 13:20; 17:21, 25; 19:13; 26:6, 10; 27:3

For Further Reflection

- Continue to read one chapter of Proverbs each day for the rest of this year (September 2020 to December 2021).
- Review the proverbs listed under points 6, 7, 8, and 9 above. Make observations on what these proverbs teach about each of these last four characteristics of folly.
- Review the emphasis of all nine characteristics of folly. Examine your life in response to each one of these characteristics. Do you find an ongoing manifestation of any of these characteristics in your own life? Where are you doing well in forsaking folly? In which areas are you stumbling?
- Think carefully: What does Solomon identify as the only antidote to the disease of folly? Explain how that "antidote" has saved you from the folly's fate.

This Week's Audio: gracechurch.org/motw

Next Meeting: Sept 30 – "Pursuing Wisdom"