

**Proverbs**  
***The Fool and His Folly***

---

Sunday, May 23, 2010

My message today is entitled, *The Fool and His Folly*. Proverbs has as much to say about fools as it does about the wise. Altogether the word “fool” and its cognates appear about 80 times in Proverbs.

As I have mentioned before, in the book of Proverbs, and in the Bible generally, wisdom and folly do not have as much to do with intelligence as with ethics. That is, the wise man is the righteous man, whereas the wicked man is a fool. Most often, the fool in Proverbs is the man who is either willingly ignorant of what is right, or else who knows what is right but refuses to do it. That is, he is portrayed as a morally bad man.

This is not always the case. At times the proverbial fool is a man who simply lacks good sense, as in the case of the one who becomes surety for a stranger. But usually the fool is described in ethical terms.

---

It has been said that if a picture is worth a thousand words, an example is worth a thousand pictures. One of the benefits of being a reader is that we can learn from the example of others. Life is short. Our experiences are limited. Consequently, the wisdom we’re able to

gain from life's experiences is also limited. But by reading, we can gain wisdom from the life experiences of others. That's one of the reasons why history is such an important area of study. We learn valuable lessons from the experiences of other people. In a sense, we ourselves live through those same experiences vicariously when we read about them.

Some years ago when I came home from the office, I told my children what an exciting day I had had. I told them that I had traveled to South Africa to fight for the British in the Boer War; that I was captured and imprisoned but made a daring escape, traveling many miles through hostile territory. After several days, tired, hungry, and alone, I happened upon the home of the one British sympathizer within miles, who because of his loyalty to the British crown assisted me in my escape. I eventually returned to England and was hailed as a hero for my extraordinary acts of bravery. As a result I was elected to public office and was eventually made Prime Minister of England during what proved to be both her darkest and most triumphant hour, leading her to victory in World War II.

I had been reading a biography of Winston Churchill. And in reading it, I experienced, in a measure, what he experienced. I learned from his successes as well as from his failures. I was inspired by his courage. I was moved by his passion. It made me aspire to his eloquence. I long to have his forward vision—to see beyond what is in order to see what can be. I desire to have the same indomitable spirit—to keep plucking away, no matter what obstacles stand in the way. He was not an

exceptionally gifted man, but he worked longer and harder than others to achieve his success. I want to avoid his failures, notably in his family, where he lost the hearts of several of his children.

A wise and discerning person will learn from the example of others. And he will learn as effectively by reading about the experiences of others as by living through them himself. One of the benefits of this is that we can learn from the blunders of other people without having to personally experience the consequences of those blunders.

In the book of Proverbs we have set before our eyes an example of a fool. And by reading about the fool, and learning from his example, we can be spared the painful consequences of making the same mistakes.

This is why we have been speaking in the last few weeks like we have. We have considered:

*The Fool and his Pride*

*The Fool and his Anger*

*The Fool and his Words*

We have wanted to paint a portrait of a fool so that we may learn from him. We learn best by example, and often as well from a negative example as from a positive one. When we see an example of foolish behavior, and properly identify it as foolish. This is often the problem—too many times we see an example of folly, but we don't recognize it as such. Instead of seeing it for what it is and being duly warned not

to do likewise, we say, "Well *that* looks fun!" And we imitate the fool's folly and suffer the consequences.

Today, with the Lord's help, we will consider the fool and his folly.

### *A Fool and the Wickedness of His Folly*

First, we will consider the wickedness of his folly. As I have already indicated, the fool is represented in Proverbs as the man who is either willingly ignorant of what is right, or else who knows what is right but refuses to do it. In other words, he is *wicked*.

A wise man is cautious and turns away from evil,  
but a fool is reckless and careless (14:16)

Here the wise man and the fool are contrasted in their respective attitudes toward evil. A wise man, it says, "is *cautious* and turns away from evil." Literally, it is, "A wise man *fears* and turns away from evil." The meaning is, a wise man fears the consequences of evil and so turns away from it. Ultimately, the fear of the consequences of evil is rooted in the fear of God, because God is the avenger of evil. We should fear God because in his holy wrath he will punish evildoers.

The full meaning of the verse, then, is, "A wise man fears the LORD, and turns away from evil." This theme is repeated many times throughout Scripture.

Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom;  
and to depart from evil is understanding (Job 28:28)

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom;  
All those who practice it have a good understanding  
(Ps. 111:10)

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom,  
and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight (Prov. 9:10)

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge;  
fools despise wisdom and instruction [i.e., *from the Lord*]  
(Prov. 1:7)

The fool is a fool precisely because he has no fear of God. It is utterly foolish not to fear him who has the power of life and death and the authority to cast into hell (Lk. 12:4-5). And because fools have no fear of God, there is nothing to restrain them from expressing the evil of their own hearts. When the apostle Paul sought in his letter to the Romans to establish the universal sinfulness of the human race by showing that even the Jews who had the Law did not keep the Law, and thus were sinners, incapable of standing on their own merits before God, he did so by citing several passages from the Old Testament which demonstrated his point beyond all doubt.

### Romans 3:9-18

Notice in particular the last statement, "There is no fear of God before their eyes" (quotation of Ps. 36:1). This tells us everything we need to know. It explains everything. Sinners sin because they have no fear of

God.

“A wise man fears and turns away from evil, but a fool is reckless and careless.” A fool is so proud and self-confident that he is unafraid of the threatenings of God. He has such an extravagant self-conceit that he defies God without fear. But Scripture says that God laughs at the wicked, for he sees his day coming (Ps. 37:13). That is, the day of the wicked man’s fall. Often God allows the wicked to flourish in order to make his fall all the more conspicuous and painful when it happens. “The bigger they are, the harder the fall.”

The hope of the wicked is vain. They will not escape the vengeance of God. The Psalmist said,

Truly you set them in slippery places;  
you make them fall to ruin.  
How they are destroyed in a moment,  
swept away utterly by terrors (Ps. 73:18-19)

“A wise man fears and turns away from evil, but a fool is reckless and careless”, and his own self-conceit will prove his undoing.

Earlier in this same chapter of Proverbs we get another glimpse of the fool’s attitude toward sin:

Fools mock at sin (14:9, NASB)

“Fools mock at sin.” It certainly is the very height of folly to laugh at that which will prove to be the cause of one’s own eternal damnation.

The evil of our times is demonstrated by the fact that not only does wickedness abound, but sinners have grown so bold as to demonstrate in the streets and flaunt their sin and demand public acceptance of it. Whether it is those who advocate the right of women to conspire with their doctors to kill their own unborn babies, or whether it is those who practice a variety of sexual deviancies, they demand that their behavior be accepted and affirmed as being good. And they laugh at those who have the audacity to say that such behavior is wicked. Indeed, they laugh at the very concept of sin itself. Nobody believes in sin anymore. This is the 21<sup>st</sup> century, after all. Let them enjoy their laughter now, for they will not be laughing later. Everyone who loves and practices evil will weep and gnash their teeth. There will be no laughter in hell. There will only be mourning and lamentation. What will become of their mocking then?

Even among Christians I am afraid there is often too much lightness concerning sin. Shall we think lightly of that which burdened so heavily the soul of our Lord Jesus Christ? It was, after all, for our sins that He died. How we should hate and despise our sins as the cause of our Lord's suffering. May we never think lightly of them! Sin is a grievous offense against God. It violates everything that God is. It is a contradiction of his nature and a defiance of his authority. We never view sin rightly unless we see it as something which God detests.

It takes a fool to mock at sin (Prov. 14:9). There is a similar verse in 10:23:

Doing wrong is like a joke to a fool;  
but wisdom is pleasure to a man of understanding (10:23)

A wise man delights in wisdom. He takes pleasure in it. But doing wrong is like a joke to a fool." Literally, it is, "Doing wrong is like *laughter* to a fool." It is easy to see that his condemnation is just.

The love which a fool has for his sin is even more vividly displayed in Proverbs 13:19,

A desire fulfilled is sweet to the soul,  
but to turn away from evil is an abomination to fools.

There is a striking irony in this. An abomination is something loathsome, detestable. *Evil* is an abomination to the Lord; but *departing from evil* is an abomination to the fool.

### *A Fool and the Consequences of his Folly*

Proverbs speaks often of the consequences of the folly of fools. As we have observed before, foolishness or wickedness tends toward self-destruction.

For the simple are killed by their turning away,  
and the complacency of fools destroys them (Prov. 1:32)

In so many ways this has been demonstrated to be true. A sinful, wicked life, that is to say, a foolish life, is self-destructive. It tends

only toward bondage, misery and death. No matter what the particular form of sin, it is always self-destructive, both in this life and in the next. For some sins it is more obvious than others, but all sinful ways are self-destructive.

The lips of the righteous feed many,  
but fools die for lack of sense (Prov. 10:21)

The folly of fools is their own undoing. They “die for lack of sense.”

Good sense is a fountain of life to him who has it,  
but the instruction of fools is folly (Prov. 16:22)

“The instruction of fools is folly.” As far as the grammatical structure is concerned, this verse can be interpreted in two different ways. First, it can be interpreted as meaning that attempting to instruct fools is itself foolish, because fools will not learn. This is how the translators of the Amplified Bible have taken it. The Amplified reads, “...to give instruction to fools is folly.” Or it can be interpreted in the sense that a fool’s own folly instructs him. That is, a fool is chastened or corrected by the negative consequences of his folly. This is how the translators of the NIV have interpreted it: It reads, “...but folly brings punishment to fools.” Similarly, the RSV, “folly is the chastisement of fools.” In other words, the consequences of the fool’s folly chastises him. He acts foolishly; he suffers the consequences; and is disciplined by them.

But a fool’s folly affects more than just himself. It also affects others.

Let a man meet a she-bear robbed of her cubs,  
rather than a fool in his folly (Prov. 17:12)

No one, of course, would wish to arouse the anger of a mother bear. And nothing will arouse her anger any more than messing with her cubs. But worse by far than encountering a bear robbed of her cubs, is to encounter a fool in his folly. A fool is a danger to himself, it's true, but he is also a danger to others. Ecclesiastes 9:18 says, "One sinner destroys much good." One fool in a family can destroy the family. One fool in a business can destroy the business. One fool in a church can destroy the church.

### *A Fool and the Punishment for His Folly*

Proverbs speaks often of the fact that a fool deserves to be punished. He experiences a form of self-punishment, as we have seen, by suffering the negative consequences of his own folly. But he deserves intentional punishment as well.

A fool's lips walk into a fight,  
and his mouth invites a beating (Prov. 18:6)

Condemnation is ready for scoffers,  
and beating for the backs of fools (Prov. 19:29)

A whip is for the horse, a bridle for the donkey,  
and a rod for the back of fools (Prov. 26:3)

The foremost characteristic of a fool is that he is a sinner. Or perhaps I should say, the foremost characteristic of a sinner is that he is a fool. As we have said before, the Bible characterizes wisdom and foolishness as righteousness and sin. If the Bible teaches anything it is that there are consequences to how we live, both in this life and in the next.