

CHAPTER 2

THE FOOL

*The fool says in his heart, "There is no God."
Psalm 14:1(a) (RSV)*

For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

1 Corinthians 1:18 (NKJV)

*The wise will inherit honour,
but fools get disgrace
Proverbs 3:35 (RSV)*

*He who commits adultery has no sense;
he who does it destroys himself.
Proverbs 6:32 (RSV)*

*Fools mock at sin,
But among the upright there is good will.
Proverbs 14:9 (NASB)*

*A wise man is cautious and turns away from evil,
But a fool is arrogant and careless.
Proverbs 14:16 (NASB)*

*He who sires a fool does so to his sorrow,
And the father of a fool has no joy.
Proverbs 17:21 (NASB)*

*The foolishness of man ruins his way,
And his heart rages against the LORD.
Proverbs 19:3 (NASB)*

*As a ring of gold in a swine's snout
So is a beautiful woman who lacks discretion.
Proverbs 11:22 (NASB)*

*Man in his pomp yet without understanding is like the beasts that perish.
Psalm 49:20 (ESV)*

Who or what is a 'fool'?

Probably the best definition of a fool is *a man who lives his life as if there was no God*. He might, technically, believe there is a God but, in practice, he *lives* as if there wasn't. To be even more precise, you could say that a fool lives his life as if there was *no Day of Judgment*, and as if God's Word did not matter much. You might think it odd for me to place so much emphasis on these issues.

However, if God has revealed that He intends to judge us, what could be more irresponsible than to ignore or under-emphasise that fact? If true, it is fundamental to the whole of our lives. To deny it, or to be unaware or unconcerned about it, would inevitably cause us to go wrong and to miss the point on just about everything. Viewed in those terms, it would not seem unreasonable to label such a person as

a fool. Let's now examine some of the key features of a fool and ask ourselves, very frankly, to what extent we display these.

It is no use just assuming that when the Bible refers to fools it is talking about other people. It is probably referring to us much of the time. Many people consider themselves wise, but have no basis for thinking that. They may be academic, successful, powerful or rich, but still have little or no wisdom. Such people may therefore be making the mistake of imagining themselves to be wise or "*being wise in their own eyes*" when, according to the Bible, they are not:

Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes and clever in their own sight.
Isaiah 5:21 (NIV)

Because of their success in some field, or because of their wealth or their qualifications, they may feel self-sufficient and assume they don't need God. Therefore, Isaiah says "*woe*" to them because their wrong attitude makes it a certainty that they will eventually fall under God's judgment and be brought down. However, before we complacently assume that this warning only refers to others, remember that we are all capable of displaying these proud and foolish attitudes ourselves, and most of us do.

Hardly anybody ever seems to see himself as being a fool

I have never yet met a person who considers himself to be a fool, or at least, who is willing to admit to being one. We are generally incapable of recognising this in ourselves. Ironically, to be capable of seeing the foolishness in yourself, you have to be already well on the way to becoming wise. Consequently, many of us have no idea that God views us as fools and we would be shocked to discover it. We may be clever, highly-qualified, and have a good job. We may go to church and even be a real Christian. But none of that prevents us from being a fool by the biblical definition.

We therefore have to examine ourselves closely and see whether we display any of the characteristics or attitudes of a fool, even if only in part, or only at certain times. It is unlikely that you have ever heard any sermon on what a fool is, let alone been challenged as to whether *you* are one. However, please don't be offended by my suggesting the possibility to you. Be willing to look at this issue with brutal honesty. Then ask God to show you *whether* you are a fool, or are behaving as one, and, if so, *when, where* and *how*? Also ask Him to help you to change.

It may be that you are only foolish in certain ways. Or it may only be at certain times or in particular parts of your life, such as in your marriage, your job, or your finances, and that you are not foolish in every other area. Even if that is so, you would still need to recognise, and admit to, those areas of partial or intermittent foolishness in yourself. If you don't, you are never going to be able to change. Therefore, let's look at some of the key features that fools tend to display. Do any of these features occur in your life or remind you of yourself?

The typical characteristics of a fool

A fully developed fool has no fear of God and *he despises wisdom*. By that I mean that he *under-values* wisdom and that it *does not matter to him*, not that he hates or dislikes it. Therefore, he has no desire to be instructed, or at least not in the things that God wants us to know:

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge;
Fools despise wisdom and instruction.
Proverbs 1:7 (NASB)

Wisdom abides in the mind of a man of understanding,
but it is not known in the heart of fools ***Proverbs 14:33 (RSV)***

*Of what use is money in the hand of a fool,
since he has no desire to get wisdom?*

Proverbs 17:16 (NIV)

Many fools are over-confident. They put their trust in themselves and in their own opinions, abilities, status, or possessions. They are self-satisfied and overly self-assured. Instead, they should put their trust in God:

*¹³ This is the fate of those who have foolish confidence,
the end of those who are pleased with their portion. Selah*

¹⁴ Like sheep they are appointed for Sheol;

*Death shall be their shepherd;
straight to the grave they descend,
and their form shall waste away;
Sheol shall be their home.*

Psalm 49:13-14 (RSV)

A fool is also complacent about the things that God wants us to be alarmed about:

*For the waywardness of the naive will kill them,
And the complacency of fools will destroy them.*

Proverbs 1:32 (NASB)

A fool is not interested in what God says, or concerned about what He wants. Therefore, he is busy with all sorts of things which are of interest to himself, while neglecting or ignoring the things, and the people, that God is interested in. Like the sons of Eli, whom God judged, the fool has *no regard for the LORD*:

Now the sons of Eli were worthless men; they had no regard for the LORD.

1 Samuel 2:12 (RSV)

*For the fool speaks folly,
and his heart is busy with iniquity,
to practice ungodliness,
to utter error concerning the LORD,
to leave the craving of the hungry unsatisfied,
and to deprive the thirsty of drink.*

Isaiah 32:6 (ESV)

Many fools will go further and even deny the very existence of God. That is a sure sign that a man has become a fully-fledged fool by the biblical definition:

The fool has said in his heart, "There is no God ".....

Psalm 14:1(a) (NASB)

In Romans, Paul explains how God considers His own existence to be completely obvious, because of the complexity, and self-evident design, of all that He has created. Yet, many people ignore the evidence that is all around them and choose not to acknowledge God as the Creator. As a consequence of this they then degenerate further, become increasingly futile in their thinking, and steadily turn into fools. So, the chain of causation works in both directions. A man says there is no God *because* he is already a fool, but he also *becomes* a fool because he rejects and ignores God:

¹⁹ For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰ Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse; ²¹ for although they

knew God they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened. ²² Claiming to be wise, they became fools, ²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles.

Romans 1:19-23 (RSV)

A fool ignores and rejects the true God. He then creates false gods of his own making to put in God's place.

Some fools go so far as to *deny* God's very existence. Others merely *ignore* God, even if they concede that He exists. But fools also create false gods of their own making, which they then put in God's place. We are all capable of that, even if we are real Christians. We need to guard against it, because if we let anything become a god to us we are acting like a fool *in that area of our life*, even if we are not a fool in everything else that we do. The definition of a 'god' is anything at all which you allow to take God's place. That then begs the questions "what is God's place?" One could define it as:

- a) to be *worshiped* (no other person or thing may ever receive our worship)
- b) to have the *first place in our lives*, ahead of all other people or things
- c) to be at the very forefront of our thoughts and plans

If any person or thing in your life ever falls within categories (a)-(c) above then, whatever it is, it has become a god to you and, if you have any such god, then you are a fool. Or, you are at least behaving like a fool in that part of your life. See how God describes those who create idols from wood and metal and then bow down and worship them. He speaks of them in scathing terms as being blind and lacking understanding:

*¹⁸ What profit is an idol
when its maker has shaped it,
a metal image, a teacher of lies?
For the workman trusts in his own creation
when he makes dumb idols!
¹⁹ Woe to him who says to a wooden thing, Awake;
to a dumb stone, Arise!
Can this give revelation?
Behold, it is overlaid with gold and silver,
and there is no breath at all in it.
Habakkuk 2:18-19 (RSV)*

⁹ All who make idols are nothing, and the things they delight in do not profit; their witnesses neither see nor know, that they may be put to shame. ¹⁰ Who fashions a god or casts an image, that is profitable for nothing? ¹¹ Behold, all his fellows shall be put to shame, and the craftsmen are but men; let them all assemble, let them stand forth, they shall be terrified, they shall be put to shame together.

¹² The ironsmith fashions it and works it over the coals; he shapes it with hammers, and forges it with his strong arm; he becomes hungry and his strength fails, he drinks no water and is faint. ¹³ The carpenter stretches a line, he marks it out with a pencil; he fashions it with planes, and marks it with a compass; he shapes it into the figure of a man, with the beauty of a man, to dwell in a house. ¹⁴ He cuts down cedars; or he chooses a holm tree or an oak and lets it grow strong among the trees of the forest; he plants a cedar and the rain nourishes it. ¹⁵ Then it becomes fuel for a man; he takes a part of it and warms himself, he kindles a fire and bakes bread; also he makes a god and worships it, he makes it a graven image and falls down before it.

¹⁶ *Half of it he burns in the fire; over the half he eats flesh, he roasts meat and is satisfied; also he warms himself and says, "Aha, I am warm, I have seen the fire!"* ¹⁷ *And the rest of it he makes into a god, his idol; and falls down to it and worships it; he prays to it and says, "Deliver me, for thou art my god!"*

¹⁸ *They know not, nor do they discern; for he has shut their eyes, so that they cannot see, and their minds, so that they cannot understand.* ¹⁹ *No one considers, nor is there knowledge or discernment to say, "Half of it I burned in the fire, I also baked bread on its coals, I roasted flesh and have eaten; and shall I make the residue of it an abomination? Shall I fall down before a block of wood?"* ²⁰ *He feeds on ashes; a deluded mind has led him astray, and he cannot deliver himself or say, "Is there not a lie in my right hand?"*

Isaiah 44:9-20 (RSV)

You might feel complacent about this, because you have not made any literal physical idols from wood or metal. If so, think again. We can create just as many gods as the Israelites. The only difference is that our gods tend to be money, career, status, ambition, popularity, fame, celebrities, sports, possessions, houses, cars etc. Any of those can become a god to you if you let it take places at (a)-(c) above, which only God can have. The Chaldeans even made a god out of their own power and might. They were famous for their military prowess and that strength, in itself, become a god to them:

⁹ *They all come for violence;
terror of them goes before them.
They gather captives like sand.*

¹⁰ *At kings they scoff,
and of rulers they make sport.*

*They laugh at every fortress,
for they heap up earth and take it.*

¹¹ *Then they sweep by like the wind and go on,
guilty men, whose own might is their god!*

Habakkuk 1:9-11 (RSV)

You might think this last point does not affect you either, but don't be too sure. For centuries, the United Kingdom was, overwhelmingly, the most powerful nation on Earth. Its army, and especially its navy, won war after war and built by far the largest empire the world has ever seen. Even until shortly before World War Two, it was the UK's policy always to ensure that its navy was stronger than the next two biggest navies in the world *combined*, in case they ever formed an alliance against us.

Many British people were therefore proud of their military strength and it became a god to some. The same is true today for some Americans, now that they are the world's only super-power. It is difficult not to take pride in such things and to begin to rely on them, to such an extent that they become gods to us. We therefore need to be alert to see our own potential for creating *any kind* of gods for ourselves, and in *any area* of our lives. Above all, we need to grasp that it is something which we ourselves are capable of, not merely something that *other people* do.

Even Christians can 'adjust' God, so as to make Him into the kind of God they want Him to be, rather than as He describes Himself in the Bible

Another problem, which affects many Christians, even real ones, is to take the God of the Bible and 'adjust' Him, such that you end up creating a false god to put in His place. I have seen many people either do this or come close to it. This happens where we, consciously or unconsciously, reject or ignore what God says about Himself in the Bible. We may dislike certain aspects of His nature or character and edit those features out and focus instead on other characteristics of God which we prefer, or are willing to accept.

We may even go so far as to invent new, or additional, or alternative characteristics for God, which He does not have. We then decide for ourselves that that is what He is like, rather than simply accept that He is *how He describes Himself* in the Bible. The classic example of this is where liberals *redefine* God and eliminate from Him any features to which they object, such as His holiness, judgment or wrath. They will usually do the same with His love for Israel and the Jewish people.

The people who do this are in severe danger of creating a false god of their own making and putting that invented god in place of the real God of the Bible. When people do this, they invariably produce a god who just happens to share all their own opinions and preferences. Indeed, their god sounds remarkably like themselves. The things that the real God says about Himself in the Bible are brushed aside and they end up worshipping a new god which is just a reflection of themselves in a mirror.

A person who does this is no less foolish than a man who worships a statue made of wood or stone. Their god is equally false and equally home-made. Therefore, we must not imagine ourselves to be immune to this kind of error. We are all in danger of creating false gods for ourselves if we do not have what the Bible calls '*the love of the truth*'. A person who has that quality is determined to believe whatever is true, and to reject whatever is false, regardless of their own personal preferences, and also regardless of whether it is convenient, or is in their financial interest.

Therefore, make up your mind to accept and believe *whatever God says about Himself* in the Bible, *irrespective of whether it suits you*. Never impose upon God other features which you would prefer Him to have. God classified the majority of the Jewish people of Jeremiah's day as fools, not because they did not *believe* in Him, but because they did not *know* Him. They also ignored or undervalued His written Word and also His verbal warnings via the prophet Jeremiah. In other words, they lived in a way which showed that God, and His commands, did not matter much to them:

***"For My people are foolish,
They know Me not;
They are stupid children
And have no understanding
They are shrewd to do evil,
But to do good they do not know."
Jeremiah 4:22 (NASB)***

The same applied to the leaders, both religious and civil. They ignored God's Word, disobeyed His commands, and even prophesied under the influence of demons:

***The priests did not say, 'Where is the LORD?'
Those who handle the law did not know me;
the shepherds transgressed against me;
the prophets prophesied by Baal
and went after things that do not profit.
Jeremiah 2:8 (ESV)***

***For the shepherds are stupid
and do not inquire of the LORD;
therefore they have not prospered,
and all their flock is scattered.
Jeremiah 10:21 (ESV)***

And the LORD said to me: "The prophets are prophesying lies in my name. I did not send them, nor did I command them or speak to them. They are prophesying to you a lying vision, worthless divination, and the deceit of their own minds.

Jeremiah 14:14 (ESV)

The main problem with the fool is not his IQ, but his heart attitude

A fool's main problem is his heart-attitude, not his IQ. He basically does not value what God values and does not care about what God says. He will not respond well to instruction or correction, especially on moral or spiritual matters. Generally speaking, a fool will not stop being a fool. Therefore, most fools never come to their senses, or change for the better, whatever is done to them, or for them:

*Though you pound a fool in a mortar
with a pestle along with crushed grain,
Yet his foolishness will not depart from him.*
Proverbs 27:22 (NASB)

The main reason a fool does not learn from instruction is that he does not value knowledge, understanding or wisdom in the first place. Therefore, he has no motivation to make the effort to seek those things. He also has no desire to find out the real truth about himself, or to change. He assumes he already knows it all and therefore needs nothing more. By contrast, a wise man is painfully aware that he does *not* already know everything. Consequently, he is eager to listen, and even to be corrected and rebuked:

*The way of a fool is right in his own eyes,
but a wise man listens to advice.*
Proverbs 12:15 (RSV)

*A rebuke goes deeper into a man of understanding
than a hundred blows into a fool*
Proverbs 17:10 (ESV)

*Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge,
But he who hates reproof is stupid.*
Proverbs 12:1 (NASB)

A fool over-estimates himself and is content to stay as he is. He sees little or nothing wrong with himself and does not recognise his own faults. Even if those are pointed out, they don't bother him, and he does not see any need to change. On the contrary, once a person becomes a fool, he usually just becomes more and more foolish. That is he becomes an ever more concentrated version of what he already is, like a sugary drink evaporating in a glass on a hot day and becoming increasingly thick and viscous. He also feeds on other people's foolishness and adds their folly to his own:

*The mind of the intelligent seeks knowledge,
But the mouth of fools feeds on folly.*
Proverbs 15:14 (NASB)

When was the last time you ever thought about your own faults? Indeed, have you ever done so at all? Foolishness is in all of us, at least to some extent, and in some areas of our life. Moreover, it will remain in us, and keep on increasing, unless we resolve to get rid of it by taking active steps. It won't ever go away by itself. So, unless you are taking such steps, the chances are that you are currently a fool and will continue to be one, at least in some areas of your attitude, conduct or character.

What do fools do and how else do they display their foolishness?

A fool prefers to maintain and express his own opinions, instead of simply finding out what God thinks and then agreeing with Him:

A fool takes no pleasure in understanding,

but only in expressing his opinion.
Proverbs 18:2 (RSV)

A fool is also careless about what he says and may casually make vows to God or promises to other people that he has no intention of keeping. A fool will also curse others, which then brings God's curse down on him in return. A fool will also condemn or criticise others without having any adequate evidence, let alone proof. For all such careless words, we will be held accountable and brought into judgment:

³⁶ *I tell you, on the day of judgment men will render account for every careless word they utter; ³⁷ for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned."*
Matthew 12:36-37 (RSV)

A fool's speech will not only bring him into deeper trouble. His voice is also an outlet for the folly that is already within him:

A fool's mouth is his ruin,
and his lips are a snare to himself.
Proverbs 18:7 (RSV)

The talk of a fool is a rod for his back,
but the lips of the wise will preserve them.
Proverbs 14:3 (RSV)

One of the classic identifying features of a fool is that he does not learn from his mistakes, even when things go badly wrong and end in failure. Therefore, time and time again, a fool will repeat the same behaviour pattern, or display the same attitude, which led to things going so badly wrong in the past:

Like a dog that returns to his vomit
is a fool that repeats his folly
Proverbs 26:11 (RSV)

Another hallmark of a fool is that he doesn't see that it is his own conduct, attitudes, ways and habits which are repeatedly leading him into trouble and failure. On every occasion, he attributes his problems to other people, circumstances, or bad luck. What he won't do is ask whether *he himself* might be the cause of what is going wrong. If he paused for a moment and asked himself that obvious question he would make a series of discoveries about himself and could even cease to be a fool. Sadly, very few fools ever do ask that question, due to complacency and their inflated view of themselves:

A wise man is cautious and turns away from evil,
But a fool is arrogant and careless.
Proverbs 14:16 (NASB)

To be angry is not necessarily sinful, but to be bad-tempered is both sinful and foolish

A fool is also quick-tempered and lacks self-control and restraint. Yet, far from seeing that as a fault, he will often even see his own forthrightness as a quality. Thus, he will express his views too quickly, or too stridently, and antagonise others unnecessarily:

The vexation of a fool is known at once,
but the prudent man ignores an insult.
Proverbs 12:16 (RSV)

A hot-tempered man stirs up strife,

*but he who is slow to anger quiets contention.
Proverbs 15:18 (ESV)*

*Whoever is slow to anger is better than the mighty,
and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city
Proverbs 16:32 (ESV)*

*He who is slow to anger has great understanding,
But he who is quick-tempered exalts folly.
Proverbs 14:29 (NASB)*

*A man without self-control
is like a city broken into and left without walls
Proverbs 25:28 (ESV)*

*A fool gives full vent to his anger,
but a wise man quietly holds it back.
Proverbs 29:11 (RSV)*

Now we see why God's anger is held back for so long, even for centuries, before He eventually brings nations to judgment. God feels anger, but He does not have a *temper*. Therefore, He never loses it. Anger can be a godly emotion, but to lose one's temper is just a display of our fleshly nature. Therefore, it is sin. God's wisdom is so infinite He can restrain His anger for as long as He chooses. We need to develop some of that patient self-control that God has. Then we would not be so quick to form, or express, our own opinions before hearing what others have to say, and before we know the full facts:

*¹⁹ Know this, my beloved brethren. Let every man be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger, ²⁰
for the anger of man does not work the righteousness of God.*

James 1:19-20 (RSV)

*If one gives answer before he hears,
it is his folly and shame.
Proverbs 18:13 (RSV)*

We should also ask God to help us to maintain a rigorous self-control and to be careful how we react to vexation and especially what we say to others:

*Set a guard, O LORD, over my mouth;
Keep watch over the door of my lips
Psalm 141:3 (ESV)*

Even if we are right, and even if what we propose to say is true, it is not always appropriate to display our knowledge or tell people what we think. A wise person knows when to stay silent, but a fool doesn't, thus adding to his problems and also making it all the more apparent that he is a fool:

*The prudent keep their knowledge to themselves,
but a fool's heart blurts out folly.
Proverbs 12:23 (NIV)*

Fools also have a craving to be seen as important. Therefore, if they see an opportunity to appear important, or gain approval in the eyes of others, by disclosing private or confidential information, they will do so. Therefore, a fool can't be trusted with secrets, whether personal or commercial, so don't ever confide in a fool, or share any sensitive information with him:

He who goes about gossiping reveals secrets;

therefore do not associate with one who speaks foolishly.
Proverbs 20:19 (RSV)

A fool will not accept correction or listen to advice

Unwillingness to take advice or be corrected is another key characteristic of a fool. It is also one reason why he tends to remain a fool, rather than change. There are traces of that unwillingness in all of us, whether we are Christians or not. However, in the fully-developed fool, it is particularly evident. Therefore, if you rebuke a fool, or a scoffer, he will only hate you for doing so. By contrast, a wise man will appreciate you for correcting him:

*⁷He who corrects a scoffer gets himself abuse,
and he who reproves a wicked man incurs injury.
⁸Do not reprove a scoffer, or he will hate you;
reprove a wise man, and he will love you.
⁹Give instruction to a wise man,
and he will be still wiser;
teach a righteous man and he will increase in learning.*
Proverbs 9:7-9 (RSV)

*³¹The ear that listens to life-giving reproof
will dwell among the wise.
³²Whoever ignores instruction despises himself,
but he who listens to reproof gains intelligence.*
Proverbs 15:31-32 (ESV)

*A wise son hears his father's instruction,
but a scoffer does not listen to rebuke.*
Proverbs 13:1 (ESV)

*A fool despises his father's instruction,
but he who heeds admonition is prudent.*
Proverbs 15:5 (RSV)

*A scoffer does not like to be reproved;
he will not go to the wise.*
Proverbs 15:12 (RSV)

Do you dislike being rebuked or corrected and react badly to it, even when what is said is true? In fact, do you resent it all the more precisely *because it is true*? Do you also object to being given advice? If so, it is evidence of your own foolishness. Therefore, ask God to help you to change, so as to become not only willing, but *eager* to be corrected. Wise people positively look for correction and value it. That is one reason why they become wise, but it is also the result of their having already started to become wise, and is thus a very good sign in itself.

One of the features of a wise boss or leader is that he will deliberately gather people around him who are brave enough to stand up to him and to constructively criticise him. He will not resent their doing so. On the contrary, a wise man will go out of his way to look for such criticism, and will even ask for it, so as to get his policies and decisions as right as he can and to avoid all unnecessary errors. We should all do the same, though the truth is that the vast majority of us don't, even if we are Christians, and won't listen to advice or criticism even when it is offered, let alone invite people to give it.

If we are wrong on a point of doctrine, or in our attitude or behaviour, most of us would prefer to remain wrong rather than be corrected, even if we now know that the other person is correct. That is especially

so if that correction has to take place in front of other people. However, if we have the love of the truth, then we will prefer to be corrected, and thus to find the real truth, even if it means being embarrassed in front of others or diminished in their estimation. It is not only about rebuke and correction. A wise person listens to advice even when he hasn't yet gone wrong or behaved badly.

In fact, he goes out looking for advice and values it highly. In stark contrast to that, a fool either takes no advice at all, or he only ever takes it from the wrong people, whose opinions are so worthless that it would be better if they said nothing at all. He prefers to ask those who are foolish themselves and thus likely to agree with him, rather than going to those who are further ahead than him, and who therefore don't agree with him. Consequently, the Bible repeatedly urges us to take advice and points out the great benefits that flow from doing so:

***Listen to advice and accept instruction,
that you may gain wisdom in the future.
Proverbs 19:20 (ESV)***

***Where there is no guidance, a people falls,
but in an abundance of counsellors there is safety.
Proverbs 11:14 (ESV)***

***Without counsel plans fail,
but with many advisers they succeed.
Proverbs 15:22 (ESV)***

Better was a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who no longer knew how to take advice.

Ecclesiastes 4:13 (ESV)

If you want an example of a fool, who resented truthful advice from a genuine prophet, consider King Ahab of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. He liked to gather around himself false prophets who would flatter him, give him positive messages, and tell him nice things that he wanted to hear. There was a genuine prophet at that time, who always told him the truth, but Ahab hated him for that very reason, because telling Ahab the truth unavoidably involved giving bad news, rebukes and warnings. This prophet's name was Micaiah and King Jehoshaphat of Judah urged Ahab to listen to him:

***⁵ Then the king of Israel gathered the prophets together, four hundred men, and said to them, "Shall we go to battle against Ramoth-gilead, or shall I refrain?" And they said, "Go up, for God will give it into the hand of the king."⁶ But Jehoshaphat said, "Is there not here another prophet of the LORD of whom we may inquire?"⁷ And the king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat, "There is yet one man by whom we may inquire of the LORD, Micaiah the son of Imlah; but I hate him, for he never prophesies good concerning me, but always evil." And Jehoshaphat said, "Let not the king say so."
2 Chronicles 18:5-7 (ESV)***

So, Ahab reluctantly called Micaiah and asked him whether he should go to war with the King of Syria at Ramoth-gilead and whether it would result in victory. Micaiah gave a truthful answer and told him it would result in defeat and in Ahab's own death if he was to attack the King of Syria. However, yet again, Ahab resented the advice and ordered that Micaiah be put in prison and fed only meagre rations of bread and water for having given him bad news. So, Micaiah was put in prison and Ahab went off to the war in which, as Micaiah had warned him, his army was defeated and he himself was killed:

***²⁵ And the king of Israel said, "Seize Micaiah and take him back to Amon the governor of the city and to Joash the king's son,²⁶ and say, 'Thus says the king, Put this fellow in prison and feed him with meager rations of bread and water until I return in peace.'²⁷ And Micaiah said, "If you return in peace, the LORD has not spoken by me." And he said, "Hear, all you peoples!"
2 Chronicles 18:25-27 (ESV)***

³³ *But a certain man drew his bow at random and struck the king of Israel between the scale armor and the breastplate. Therefore he said to the driver of his chariot, "Turn around and carry me out of the battle, for I am wounded."* ³⁴ *And the battle continued that day, and the king of Israel was propped up in his chariot facing the Syrians until evening. Then at sunset he died.*

2 Chronicles 18:33-34 (ESV)

A fool automatically assumes that his own position is right and that his own needs are the most important

A fool is "wise in his own eyes". He therefore tends to see himself as being already right and not needing any advice:

"A sluggard is wiser in his own eyes than seven people who answer discreetly."
Proverbs 26:16 (NIV)

A fool also tends to trust in his own abilities and especially his own mind:

"He who trusts in his own mind is a fool....."
Proverbs 28:26(a) (RSV)

When there is a dispute, or conflicting needs and insufficient resources to go round, a fool will automatically assume, without even pausing to think about it, that:

- a) he is obviously in the right,
- b) his own need, or his own activity or project, is obviously the most important, and the most urgent,
- c) if any wrong has been done, it has only ever been done *to* him, never *by* him.

Are any of these points true of you? Are you programmed with default-settings which immediately assume (a)-(c) about yourself? Or, when you are in a conflict, do you genuinely cross-examine yourself to find out *whether* you are actually right? Do you force yourself to admit unpalatable facts to yourself, and to others, which would put you in the wrong, or show that your need, or your role, is less important than someone else's? Such probing interrogation of oneself is rare and only ever happens at all if you force yourself to do it.

Such an approach will never be taken by what the Bible calls your *old man*, i.e. your sinful, flesh nature. (See my Book 7) The old man always puts himself first and will never change. If we are to avoid leaping automatically to these selfish assumptions and reactions, we must choose to *act in the opposite spirit*. That means to force yourself to say and do the opposite of what your own flesh nature wants. It can also mean doing the opposite of what the other person is doing to you, because they have a sinful, fleshly nature too.

Unless we intervene to stop ourselves, we will instinctively respond in the same way and *give as good as we get*. When we choose to act in the opposite spirit it is as if we are grabbing the 'microphone', or the 'steering wheel', from our old man and handing it to our *new man*. That is the part of us which was reborn when we were saved. Our new man cannot sin and will always react well. However, he is not always the one making the decisions, or *holding the microphone* and speaking for us.

Such righteous responses will only occur if, with our *will*, we consciously *insist* that our new man has his way, rather than letting our old man or flesh speak for us. That choice to adopt the manner and approach of our new man will never come naturally, but it does gradually get less difficult the more we practice it. Where there is conflict, or where blame is being allocated, take note how few people, (probably including you), are genuinely willing to see themselves as being at fault.

The same trait is in all of us, to one extent or another. That reluctance even to consider the possibility of being in the wrong is still very strong, even when the facts are laid out plainly for all to see. The automatic reaction, when we are operating in our flesh nature, is to deny all blame, regardless of the facts. Many of us do so even if it means adopting a position of wilful blindness, such that we are the only person in the room who cannot see what is as plain as day to everyone else.

Our flesh also regards it as inherently wrong, and objectionable, for anybody to criticise us, however validly they may do so. The absolute assumption that we are in the right is almost universal. But that self-justifying attitude will do us a lot of damage. It will also prevent us from learning or changing, because we will assume that we have no need to do either of those things. So, being wise in our own eyes will bring us down and cause us to fail:

***“Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes,
and shrewd in their own sight!”***

Isaiah 5:21 (RSV)

I can think of a meeting which I was told of, involving persons A, B, C and D. Person A was obviously partly at fault, but spoke only of the wrong which person D had done. Person A would not tolerate anybody saying anything to contradict that, or to suggest that they bore any responsibility. In fact, person A had plainly contributed to the difficult situation, but would not allow that to be said. The very idea of being at fault in any way was unthinkable to person A and certainly ‘unsayable’ by anybody else.

A fool has the fear of *man*, instead of the fear of *God*. He fears the disapproval of others and allows peer pressure to dictate how he lives

Few of us are brave enough, or wise enough, to live our lives without seeking continually for the approval of others. Obviously, we should not deliberately seek to antagonise people. On the contrary, we should try hard to avoid doing so. But it is not right for us to *want* their approval so strongly that we are willing to do wrong in order to get it. Many of us, even in the Church, would prefer to do wrong, but be approved of by those around us, than to do what is right, if that would mean being disapproved of.

However, how can it make any sense to do wrong, and thereby receive God's disapproval and eternal judgment, merely to gain the temporary (and misguided) approval of those around us? King Saul of Israel was judged to be a failure, and was rejected by God, despite all his abilities. He failed because he feared the opinions of the people instead of fearing God. That fear of public opinion led to him making a series of wrong choices and eventually ended with him being deposed by God:

***²³ For rebellion is as the sin of divination,
and presumption is as iniquity and idolatry.
Because you have rejected the word of the LORD,
he has also rejected you from being king.”***

²⁴ Saul said to Samuel, “I have sinned, for I have transgressed the commandment of the LORD and your words, because I feared the people and obeyed their voice.

1 Samuel 15:23-24 (ESV)

The approval, or disapproval, of our fellow human beings has no eternal significance. It is only God's view of us that really counts. Many of us therefore end up with our lives shipwrecked simply because we wanted to be approved of by others. The Bible calls this craving for approval “*the fear of man*”. If we are foolish enough to let this fear influence us it will become a *snare* which will trap us and paralyse us. In the end it will ruin us. Instead, we should focus solely on what God wants, seek only for His approval, and never let anybody pressurise us into doing otherwise:

*The fear of man lays a snare,
but he who trusts in the LORD is safe.
Proverbs 29:25 (RSV)*

The craving for people's approval, or the fear of their disapproval, not only leads us into sin, but also into foolish, unnecessary decisions and activities. It therefore causes people to do things they don't actually enjoy, and to be in places where they don't really want to be, and with people they don't even like, merely to avoid the criticism of others. Even if those situations don't involve outright sin, they still involve, at the very least, wasting your own time, and doing things that don't profit you.

And it is done solely to please others, even where those others, whose approval you seek, are people of whom you *don't actually approve yourself!* What could be sillier, and sadder, than that? You only have one shot at this life, and each day can only be lived once. Therefore, it is utter folly to feel obliged to please others, and therefore not to do what you really want, *and need*, to do merely because they might disapprove.

When I was a teenager and beginning to go out to pubs with my friends, who were all non-Christians, my Dad advised me never to let myself be pressured into drinking at the same pace as any other man, or to match how much they drink. He said I should only ever drink *what I wanted to drink*, and only ever at my *own pace*, no matter what everybody else was drinking, and no matter what they thought of me. That might be easy enough for a mature adult, but for a teenager, mixing in groups which applaud laddish behaviour, and where drinking is treated as a race, that was harder to do.

I took my Dad's advice and when others had pints of beer, I had halves. I also made those last, such that I did not get another glass every time they did. Therefore, during an evening, I would drink about half, or even a third, of what the others drank. I refused to be a follower, or to accept the idea that 'real men' are those who drink the most, or the fastest. I insisted on only ever doing what *I wanted to do*, never what *others* thought I should do. I recommend that resolute approach, not only in relation to drinking, but every aspect of life. It is liberating not to be ruled by the opinions or practices of others.

We must not yield to peer pressure, even where doing so would not be sin

Let me give another example of how peer pressure arises, and how it needs to be resisted, even where it doesn't involve sin. I was once a member of a YMCA committee. The Chairman was keen on money-raising activities, whereby committee members were urged to spend evenings, and even whole days, doing things to raise cash for the YMCA. One such activity was going round all day gathering old newspapers to sell for recycling. They didn't make much money from it and I felt that spending a whole day of my precious time just to raise a modest sum was not a good idea.

At any rate, I simply *didn't want to do it*, even if they were to make a good profit, because I valued my free time. So, in one particular committee meeting, the Chairman proposed a newspaper-gathering day and went round each committee member, one by one, asking us to confirm that we would come. He intentionally put them on the spot and most of them caved in, even though they may not have wanted to spend a whole Saturday doing that. A few made excuses about other prior engagements, probably because they knew how he operated, and they had come prepared with ready-made excuses.

When they did try to wriggle out of it, the Chairman acted even more manipulatively and put pressure on them to rearrange their diaries, or to drop out of the other things in order to do this. He was really quite pushy and the whole committee seemed to be too afraid to say openly, in front of everybody else, that they just *didn't want to do it*. They all assumed they had to do what he wanted unless they had some compelling excuse, or an important and immovable prior engagement. I was the last one to be asked whether I was coming and I replied, calmly, and *completely unapologetically*, that I was not.

However, he didn't leave it at that. He asked me what prior engagement I had which prevented me from coming. I then replied, again without any apology, "*Nothing whatsoever. I just intend to enjoy that Saturday as a day off and relax.*" When I said that the whole committee fell silent and the Chairman was stunned. Some members looked at me with a mixture of envy, regret and pained admiration for having the boldness to say what they felt, but were afraid to say. One member approached me afterwards and said he was kicking himself for not having the nerve to do as I had. But, by then, he felt trapped into doing it.

Another example involves something my Dad did on his first day as a coalminer. He and several other brand new recruits were placed under the care of an old miner who was given the soft duty of showing them around the pit. The old miner had to tell them what to do and point out safety hazards. He was in his sixties with a group of lively youngsters to look after. At some point the old man had to do something for a few minutes and he left the youngsters unaccompanied deep underground.

While he was away, some of them had the idea of playing a trick on him by pretending to have got lost. So they each hid in shadowy corners, or behind machinery, and made no noise. When the old man came back a few moments later they were nowhere to be found. He then began to call out to them and, when there was no reply, he started to panic, fearing that some harm may have come to them or that they had wandered off into a dangerous zone.

My Dad told me, decades later, that he could not bear to hear the anxious shouts of the old man as he searched for them in his distress. So, my Dad emerged from the shadows and shouted: "*It's alright. We are all here. We have just been hiding.*" The joke was then over, due to my Dad's intervention, and the others all emerged too. Speaking up in that way, and being willing to stand alone, and maybe to be disapproved of, or considered '*not one of the boys*', is very difficult.

However, it is also right, and absolutely necessary, if you want to live successfully, operate freely, and do what you believe in, rather than what others think you should do. Ironically, in the end, people will actually admire you more for *not* fearing them, and for not slavishly seeking their approval, than if you had chosen to conform. I am proud of what my Dad did that day as a young man, and for his courage and independence of mind. It was typical of how he always acted.

The fool tends to live for pleasure and he is often a mocker and a scoffer.

A fool generally lives for the moment and has his heart set on pleasure and amusement. The things that ought to grieve him have no effect upon him and are even sneered at:

*The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning,
but the heart of fools is in the house of pleasure.
Ecclesiastes 7:4 (NIV)*

There is little point in a wise person trying to argue with a fool, or at least not if the aim is to enlighten him. It won't succeed. The fool will either get angry or mock what is said. He will not listen, or learn anything from it:

*When a wise man has a controversy with a foolish man,
The foolish man either rages or laughs, and there is no rest.
Proverbs 29:9 (NASB)*

As an employer I wasted a vast amount of time for many years trying to rebuke and correct fools. But they had no interest in listening to any corrections, and no desire to learn or change. It took me years to realise that what I was doing was futile. Now I don't even attempt it. If I come to the conclusion that an employee is a proper fool, not just partially and intermittently foolish, as we all are, then I no longer make any attempt to improve him or challenge him. I just get rid of him.

I eventually realised that I need to focus all my energy on training those staff who genuinely want to learn and who are open and willing to be instructed. That discovery changed my life and altered the whole atmosphere of my business. I decided to aim to create a *fool-free zone* in my firm. If ever a fool managed to get recruited, I did not let him stay for long. That may sound harsh, especially in the UK, where sacking people is frowned upon and assumed to be wrong. However, it is the only sensible way to operate, for the sake of the business, its clients, and the other staff.

Fools live their lives as if actions don't have consequences.

All actions have consequences, whether good or bad. This is closely linked to the law of sowing and reaping, which we will look at in closer detail in chapter 12 below. Each of the thousands of steps that we take and decisions that we make have consequences. Some are easily foreseeable and others less so. However, much of the time, they are at least reasonably foreseeable. Wise people are acutely conscious of those potential consequences, and bear them in mind whenever they take any action or make any decision.

But fools don't. They mistakenly suppose that they can do whatever they want and that no adverse consequences will follow. Or they give it no thought at all. Above all, they imagine that they can sin and that nothing will happen to them as a result. They also imagine that they will never have to face God's judgment for their actions or omissions, whether here and now, or later in life, or even at the final judgment. Therefore, a fool assumes, usually without giving it any thought, that he can get away with things.

Sadly, that is not so. Even when a person later repents and is forgiven by God, and even if he goes on to become a mature disciple, he will still have to live with the results of his past actions, even if those took place before his conversion. Becoming a Christian wipes away the *guilt and penalty* of our sins, but it does not remove their *consequences*. A wise person bears that fact in mind and takes it into account when deciding what he can and cannot, and what he should and should not, do. But the fool presses ahead with indifference.

For example, if we sin sexually and pregnancy results, then a child has come into the world, for whom we are responsible. That child's existence will lead to long term, indeed eternal, consequences, even if we did not foresee those when we sinned sexually. Even if we try to prevent those consequences by asking an abortionist to kill the child for us, there is still no escape. The only difference is that we will have to face the consequences of having murdered our own son or daughter rather than of having to look after them.

Such a step cannot be taken without consequences of some kind, whether spiritual, emotional, or physical. Regardless of your own personal opinions as to whether abortion is wrong, those will still follow. In fact, they will pursue you, and for as long as you live. A wise person knows all this, and regulates his conduct and choices accordingly. But a fool doesn't, and he therefore suffers for it. The same principle applies, not only in the context of sexual sin or abortion, but right across the board.

Therefore, if we lie, steal, gamble, borrow, skive in our job or our studies, mix with the wrong people, marry the wrong person, watch the wrong TV programmes, or sin in any other way whatsoever, then consequences will inevitably flow from it. Conversely, if we act rightly, love others, obey God, study the Bible, bless Israel and the Jewish people, and so on, then positive consequences will follow, whether sooner or later, and whether we foresee them or not.

The fool reveals his nature through his words.

The Bible says "...out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks". It means that whatever we are on the inside will inevitably be revealed in the way we speak, whether we are foolish, wicked, wise or simple. Sooner or later, our character will display itself through our mouths:

³⁴Brood of vipers! How can you, being evil, speak good things? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. ³⁵A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good things, and an evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth evil things.

Matthew 12:34-35 (NKJV)

It is rare for anything valuable to come out of the mouth of a fool, at least not during the times when he is operating as a fool. What he has to say is usually just worthless noise:

*The tongue of the wise dispenses knowledge,
but the mouths of fools pour out folly.*

Proverbs 15:2 (RSV)

*For as the crackling of thorn bushes under a pot,
So is the laughter of the fool;
And this too is futility.*

Ecclesiastes 7:6 (NASB)

*A foolish woman is noisy;
she is wanton and knows no shame.*

Proverbs 9:13 (RSV)

The fool is lazy and does not plan ahead or work to achieve his future goals

Many fools (not all) see no point in working hard and take no pleasure from it. They will therefore try to avoid effort. It is linked to the fact that the fool does not look ahead. He thinks only of the present, whereas a wise person focuses on the future. The fool wants gratification now and is not willing to wait for it. The idea of working now, and only being rewarded later, doesn't appeal to him. But he will lose out later in life when he has nothing to show for the times when he wasted his opportunities:

*The sluggard does not plow in the autumn;
he will seek at harvest and have nothing.*

Proverbs 20:4 (RSV)

*Like vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes,
So is the lazy one to those who send him.*

Proverbs 10:26 (NASB)

Please also refer to chapter 11 below in which I look much more closely at the subject of work and the workplace, and why so many employees are not good workers.

The fool has no regard for the concept of eternity.

A fool rarely thinks about eternity, if at all, and has no regard for the Day of Judgment. Therefore, if you don't currently spend much time considering eternity in general, and judgment in particular, then, at least in that regard, you are being foolish. Accordingly, one way to become wiser is to force yourself to reflect on your own death and on the judgment which will then follow as you enter into eternity.

Considering those momentous future events will profoundly affect how you live *now* and alter all your priorities. This is one of the best ways that we can grow in wisdom and rid ourselves of foolishness.

A fool is self-centred. He automatically sees himself as being at the centre of the universe, with all other people and situations orbiting around him.

A fool is always positioned at the centre of his own universe. It is actually difficult for any of us to avoid this, not just fools. Obsession with oneself, and focusing excessively, or even exclusively, on one's own needs, is the natural attitude of our *old man*, which we all continue to have, even after we are saved. Therefore, this is deeply ingrained in all of us. I trained my staff about this tendency to be self-centred and referred to it as having a *wrong astronomy*. That means automatically assuming we are at the centre of the universe and that clients, colleagues, bosses etc. are all in orbit around us.

If we think that way we will inevitably go wrong. Instead, we have to make a decision to go against all our ingrained fleshly instincts and start to see ourselves as being in orbit around whoever we are dealing with or working for, not to see them as being in orbit around us. So, if we are a lawyer, the client is at the centre and we must always be on the periphery, in orbit around him. If we are a nurse, the patient's needs should always be at the centre, never our own needs. That is easy enough to say as a slogan, but hard to do and even harder to get your staff to do it.

My personal belief is that fewer than 10% of British people genuinely think that way about their jobs, or indeed about any part of their lives. Actually, it's probably fewer than 2%. However, if you will force yourself to adopt this attitude it will have a knock-on effect on all your actions, decisions and priorities. Everything changes when you realise that you are not even the centre of your own workplace, let alone the universe. Keep on reminding yourself of your correct place, which must always be at the *edge* of any situation you are in, *not the centre*.

You are not meant to be at the centre of anything and if that is where you think you are, then you have a wrong view of yourself and of the world. I once interviewed a young woman aged 22 named Emily who had just graduated in law and wanted to become a trainee solicitor. She did quite well in the interview, so I invited her in for an open-ended trial period. My policy was always to pay candidates a full daily wage if they were invited to have a short trial period with us, even though they never did anything of any value for us. That approach is unusual. Many firms treat it as unpaid work experience.

The purpose of the trial was just for us to assess them, not for them to actually help us, or to do any useful work. Emily did quite well on her first trial day, so I invited her to stick around and go onto a more extended trial period, during which we would continue to review her daily. After 4 days on trial I told her that she was still doing well and that I was therefore going to extend her (*fully paid*) trial period even longer. This was in the middle of a deep recession, when such jobs were hard to get.

To my surprise she began to cry and complained that she had already been on trial for 4 days and that we "*ought to be able to decide by now*". She said it was "*not fair*" to keep her on trial! I would have been amazed by that reaction years ago, but I have learned that it is a very common attitude. Her problem was she was profoundly self-centred and also proud. Therefore, it was intolerable to her that she had not been accepted immediately.

The trial period was actually a privilege, but she could only see it as an imposition, which was delaying her in getting what she wanted. Her self-centeredness had never been challenged before by her parents or teachers. They had therefore helped to make her into a fool. I brought her trial period to a swift end and sent her home that day. However, she saw nothing wrong in what she had said. Her focus was so entirely upon herself that she thought she was being mistreated and that we had wronged her by not approving of her immediately and appointing her to a permanent job.

A fool is self-absorbed and is guided almost entirely by self-interest, not by duty or by the wish to act rightly.

When a fool is choosing what to do, or how to react to a situation, self-interest will usually be his only guiding principle. One sees this at elections, where most people vote primarily, or even solely, on the basis of what they imagine to be best for themselves. They have no regard for, and don't even give any thought to, the question of what God wants, or what is best for their local community or for the nation. Such considerations rarely come into it. Thus, few politicians today even bother appealing to our generosity or our sense of civic duty.

They know that most of us are only interested in ourselves. Therefore, they are realistic enough to focus on what interests us and they carefully avoid telling us any home truths. We can't blame them. It's mainly our fault, not theirs. We are bigger fools than them. They are just responding rationally to the facts of what kind of an electorate we really are. If our thinking is self-centred, we need, first of all, to acknowledge that fact and then take active steps to change. When we vote we must focus on our duty, on what God wants, and on what is inherently right, not just on what we think is best for ourselves.

The same applies to all areas of life and to all the choices we have to make in our work life or family life, not just how we use our vote. However, as with all the other changes we need to make, it won't even begin to happen unless we force ourselves to think differently. One of the features of self-absorption is that it makes you forgetful of others, and of their needs. Instead, what we actually need is to be forgetful of ourselves and mindful of others.

That is part of what it means to “*die to self*” and “*crucify the flesh*”. Doing so helps us to wrench our attention away from ourselves and apply it elsewhere, contrary to all our sinful habits and ways. That is one of the good things about pursuing ‘*the Great Commission*’ which Jesus instituted in Matthew 28:19-20, when He commanded us to make disciples of all nations. The process of doing that helps us to redirect our focus away from ourselves and towards others, which would never happen naturally.

The world's wisdom, which is actually just folly, is all about looking after number one and putting yourself first. Approaching life in that way, as the unsaved world, and too much of the Church, does, will only cause you to become more self-absorbed and thus, more of a fool. But obeying Jesus's words and applying yourself to the task of making disciples, will help to cure you of that. It will ‘recalibrate’ you, until focusing on others begins to become normal, and even your preference.

God commands us not to waste our time with fools as we will only become like them.

There are a number of reasons why we are told not to associate with fools. Firstly, one cannot learn much from a fool, except by noting his bad habits and seeking to avoid them in yourself. Other than that, he has very little to offer. But he will not learn from you either, because he has *no desire to*. Secondly, whatever group we currently belong to, we will inevitably become like the people with whom we spend most of our time. Whatever group they may be in, we will move in their direction. That law applies just the same if we spend time with fools as it does with people from any other group:

*He who walks with wise men will be wise,
but the companion of fools will suffer harm.
Proverbs 13:20 (NASB)*

²⁴*Do not associate with a man given to anger;
Or go with a hot-tempered man,
²⁵Or you will learn his ways and find a snare for yourself.
Proverbs 22:24-25 (NASB)*

Do not be deceived: “Bad company ruins good morals.” 1 Corinthians 15:33 (ESV)

*Leave the presence of a fool,
for there you do not meet words of knowledge.
Proverbs 14:7 (ESV)*

*Be not envious of evil men,
nor desire to be with them,
Proverbs 24:1 (ESV)*

²¹ *My son, fear the LORD and the king,
and do not join with those who do otherwise,*
²² *for disaster will arise suddenly from them,
and who knows the ruin that will come from them both?
Proverbs 24:21-22 (ESV)*

If a fool was to spend a lot of time with wise men then, over a period of time, he too would change and become wiser. However, that rarely happens because fools *don't want* to be with wise people and try hard to avoid them. Wise people make fools feel uncomfortable, just by being there, even if they say nothing to rebuke them. So you will never become wise unless you are willing to be made to feel uncomfortable, for a time, by being with people who are wiser, and godlier, than you.

The process of being influenced by those people, and changing for the better, will always feel difficult while it is happening. Moreover, the benefit only becomes apparent later, which is another reason why it does not appeal to fools. Therefore, a wise man will not usually be able to influence a fool. If he engages him in a meaningful conversation, about anything that really matters, the fool will usually only despise what is said and will not listen:

*Do not speak in the hearing of a fool,
For he will despise the wisdom of your words.
Proverbs 23:9 (NASB)*

Therefore, if you aren't yet a fully-developed fool, and don't want to become one, avoid spending time with fools. Likewise, if you are behaving foolishly in some ways already, but don't want to continue doing so, or to get even worse, then keep away from other fools. Avoid their influence and break off your contact with them. However, there are some people whom we have no choice but to be with. They may be our neighbours or work colleagues, such that contact with them can't be avoided.

Those are not the people we are told to avoid. The Bible is referring to the *voluntary* choices we make as to whom we spend our time with. God only wants us to associate, where possible, with those who are likely to be a good influence upon us, or whom we can realistically hope to influence for good. In this next pair of linked verses from Proverbs we are given advice that sounds like a contradiction. Verse 4 says:

*Answer not a fool according to his folly,
lest you be like him yourself.
Proverbs 26:4 (RSV)*

But verse 5 says:

*Answer a fool according to his folly,
lest he be wise in his own eyes.
Proverbs 26:5 (RSV)*

In fact, there is no contradiction. The two verses go together and what they mean is:

- a) Do *not* sink to the same level as a fool by answering him in the same foolish, carnal, scoffing manner in which *he speaks to you*. If you do, you will just become like him. But,
- b) *do* answer him in the way he *deserves*, i.e. by side-stepping or ignoring him. Don't waste any time trying to influence or educate a fool. Just avoid him. Spend your time with wise or simple people instead, so far as you can.

It is both foolish and sinful to drink alcohol excessively, to smoke tobacco, and to take drugs.

Contrary to many denominational traditions, it is *not* a sin to drink alcohol. Alcohol, in itself, is not an evil and we are free to drink it. The Bible makes that very clear. Admittedly, some people in the Bible are told not to drink, and not to do various other things either. But the rest of us are never forbidden to drink, as such, but only forbidden to get drunk.

For example, look at the 'Nazirite vow' which a small minority of Jews took, with John the Baptist being the most famous example. Those who took this vow separated themselves to the LORD and, as part of that, they separated themselves from wine and strong drink, but also even from the very grapes themselves, or even the seeds:

¹ And the LORD said to Moses, ² "Say to the people of Israel, When either a man or a woman makes a special vow, the vow of a Nazirite, to separate himself to the LORD, ³ he shall separate himself from wine and strong drink; he shall drink no vinegar made from wine or strong drink, and shall not drink any juice of grapes or eat grapes, fresh or dried. ⁴ All the days of his separation he shall eat nothing that is produced by the grapevine, not even the seeds or the skins.

Numbers 6:1-4 (RSV)

Therefore, those who took this vow, whom we refer to as 'Nazirites', were the exception, not the norm. I stress that fact because some people oppose alcohol in and of itself, and they refer to the command given to the Nazirites as if it applied to all of us when it plainly doesn't. It only applies to those who are called by God to that special ministry, which was always a small minority. Moreover, note how, in the above passage, both wine *and* strong drink are referred to, but also *the very grapes themselves*, and their *juice* and even their *seeds*.

If, therefore, God intended the Nazirite vow to apply to all of us, which He doesn't, then we would all be forbidden to drink grape juice either, or even to eat grapes. But those who wish to abolish alcohol, and who tell us that God forbids its consumption, never say that we can't drink grape juice or eat grapes. They know that would be absurd and that the Bible makes no such command. They also know, deep down, as we all know, that wine means wine and grape juice means grape juice and that they are two different things.

The very fact that God refers to both in the above passage proves that wine and grape juice are not the same things and that when God refers to wine, He means wine, i.e. fermented, alcoholic wine, not grape juice. I stress that point too, because there are many people who point to passages in the Bible where godly characters drink wine, including the prophets and apostles, and even Jesus Himself, and they explain it away by saying that they were all drinking unfermented, non-alcoholic grape juice. But, as we saw, those are two different things and God does not confuse the two words in the Bible.

Therefore, although wine, and everything else associated with the grape, plus various other things such as cutting their hair, were forbidden to the Nazirites, they are not forbidden to the rest of us. Perhaps the most compelling proof of that point is that Jesus Himself produced wine for the wedding at Cana. Moreover, it was not mere non-alcoholic 'grape juice', as some people implausibly claim. It was real wine. If wine was forbidden to us, why would God Himself speak favourably of it, and cause the ground to provide it to us as He speaks of in these verses?

¹⁴ *You cause the grass to grow for the livestock
and plants for man to cultivate,
that he may bring forth food from the earth*
¹⁵ *and wine to gladden the heart of man,
oil to make his face shine
and bread to strengthen man's heart.*

Psalm 104:14-15 (ESV)

In any case, how can a person's heart be 'gladdened' by drinking mere unfermented grape juice? It is ridiculous to suggest, as so many do, that that is what is meant. If you take that approach, why not also suggest that the verses which refer to bread or olive oil are not referring to real bread or real olive oil? Why single out wine alone when making that claim? Also, why would we be told in the Bible not to get *drunk* on wine if wine is just unfermented grape juice? It would not be possible to do so.

We cannot have it both ways and interpret the meaning of the word 'wine' differently, according to whatever suits our argument at any given time. The suggestion that God means non-alcoholic wine is absurd and the only limitation which the Bible puts upon us is that our drinking should not be *excessive*. In other words, we must not get *drunk*. So moderate, sensible, responsible drinking is fine and involves no sin at all.

Although drinking alcohol is not a sin, drunkenness is, and we must avoid it

However, having said all of that, the fact is that getting drunk is a sin, in itself, even if it does not lead to other things such as violence or promiscuity. The main reason why God forbids drunkenness, as opposed to Him forbidding any drinking at all, even when it is done moderately, is that when a person is drunk they lose some or all of their *self-control*. Therefore, the person becomes vulnerable and is at increased risk *from their own sin nature* which, while they are drunk, has far greater power over them. That is because their mind, and especially their will, cease to function as effectively as they should.

Therefore, quite foreseeably, a person who is drunk is likely to do or say things to others, or allow things to be done to them, which would never have happened if they had not been drunk. That is surely obvious. We see the evidence for it all around us. Drunken people often behave appallingly and destroy many lives, including our own. This arises, directly or indirectly, through the effects of their drunkenness, either on themselves, or their families, or on others with whom they come into contact. Therefore, the Bible warns us against drunkenness:

*Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler;
and whoever is led astray by it is not wise.*
Proverbs 20:1 (RSV)

²⁰ *Be not among drunkards
or among gluttonous eaters of meat,*
²¹ *for the drunkard and the glutton will come to poverty,
and slumber will clothe them with rags.*
Proverbs 23:20-21 (ESV)

¹¹ *Woe to those who rise early in the morning,
that they may run after strong drink,
who tarry late into the evening
till wine inflames them!*
¹² *They have lyre and harp,
timbrel and flute and wine at their feasts;
but they do not regard the deeds of the LORD,
or see the work of his hands.* *Isaiah 5:11-12 (RSV)*

¹³let us conduct ourselves becomingly as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. ¹⁴ But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Romans 13:13-14 (RSV)

¹⁹ Now the works of the flesh are plain: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, ²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, ²¹ envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God.

Galatians 5:19-21 (RSV)

So, we have very clear biblical commands not to get drunk and the wisdom of that is corroborated by the evidence of our own eyes as to what happens to people when they do. Therefore, we need to make sure that we never get drunk. If we do, we are effectively abdicating our responsibility for maintaining our control of ourselves and allowing it to be taken away from us. Indeed, much of the time, people positively *want* to lose their ‘inhibitions’, which is a negative alternative word for ‘self-control’.

Therefore, they get drunk deliberately, to help themselves cast off restraint and to do things, including sinful things, which they would never do otherwise. Accordingly, from God’s perspective, to deliberately drink alcohol to the extent that we lose some or all of our self-control, is a serious sin in itself. It would be like tampering with the brakes and steering of your car, thereby reducing or removing your ability to control it or stop it, but then getting in and driving it on the road.

Everyone would see that as an act of great recklessness, and even wickedness, given the obvious potential that your car has to injure yourself or others. In the same way, doing anything to deliberately reduce your own restraints, and knowingly rendering yourself more *likely to sin*, or to sin in *more serious ways*, is a sinful act in itself. That would still be so, even if it was not your express intention for it to result in any harm. Merely to expose yourself, and others, to an increased risk that such things *might* occur is sinful.

After all, weakening the brake pipes on your car does not guarantee that an accident will occur. It does, however, foreseeably increase the chances of it happening and the point is that to take such an additional risk is blameworthy. Firstly, you have no right to take risks with other people’s lives. But, secondly, you don’t even have the right to take risks with your own life. Neither do you have any right to take risks with your own propensity to sin, because you *do not own yourself*. You, and your body, belong to God. You are only a *steward* of His property, not the owner.

You cannot therefore tell Him that what you do with your own body is exclusively your own affair, even if you could be sure, which you can’t, that nobody else would ever be harmed by your drinking. The point is that God owns you and your body, and He is fully entitled to tell you what you can and cannot do with it. That fact alone is conclusive, quite apart from the additional point that drunkenness also *increases the chances of your sinning against Him* in lots of other ways as well, by reducing your self-control in all areas.

I am warning against the danger, and the sinfulness, of drunkenness because it is on the increase, at least in the UK. Amongst older people, especially those in professional jobs or from educated, wealthier backgrounds, a high proportion are now quietly sitting at home most evenings and drinking themselves into a numb forgetfulness. They are seeking to calm their nerves, or to mask their unhappiness, or to reduce the dullness of their lives.

Amongst young people this is occurring more publicly, as they go out drinking into the small hours, including engaging in ‘drinking games’. Many drink cheap vodka from the supermarket, even before they go out, so as to get drunk less expensively. Their excessive drinking not only results in sin, violence and promiscuity, but also in serious damage to their own *health*. Doctors are reporting that many people in their twenties or thirties now have the kind of unhealthy livers that were previously

associated with people in their seventies. Isaiah has something to say to those who turn drinking into a contest:

***Woe to those who are heroes at drinking wine,
and valiant men in mixing strong drink,
Isaiah 5:22 (RSV)***

However, it is not only a person's health which will be damaged by drunkenness. There is a clear pattern that drunkards also tend to end up in *poverty* for all sorts of direct and indirect reasons:

***He who loves pleasure will be a poor man;
he who loves wine and oil will not be rich.
Proverbs 21:17 (RSV)***

Unlike alcohol, tobacco and illegal drugs are sinful in themselves and should not be used except on medical advice

All the same points apply, with even greater force, to those who take illegal drugs, or even the so-called 'legal highs', to produce the kind of euphoria and reduced inhibitions that excessive alcohol produces. Such drugs are not only a cause of increased sin, due to reduced self-control. They also damage health, destroy families and even render people effectively unemployable. Again, only a fool would take such drugs. At any rate, anyone who does so will soon *become* a fool, even if he isn't already one when he begins.

Concerning tobacco, only a fool would *continue* to smoke by choosing not to take steps to overcome his addiction. However, to intentionally *start* to smoke when one isn't yet addicted, makes one an even bigger fool. One might partially excuse those who are now addicted, due to having started in the past, such that they now find it difficult to stop. But for a person who is *not addicted* to deliberately *create* an addiction and then continue to smoke merely to satisfy a craving which they only have because they *chose to create it*, is utter folly, quite apart from the damage they inflict on their health.

There surely cannot be any person, at least in the West, who is not aware that smoking causes lung cancer, heart disease, and many other illnesses. Thus, to start to inflict those on oneself, or to continue to do so, is foolishness, and sin as well, since one is wilfully damaging one's own body which, as we saw, is not one's own property. It is also desecrating a temple of the Holy Spirit in the case of a believer.

Some guidelines on how to drink alcohol sensibly rather than foolishly

Returning to the theme of alcohol, which is the only drug that is legitimate, i.e. when used moderately, I suggest some simple guidelines to prevent it getting control over you;

- a) Never drink alcohol when you are *alone*. It was given to us as a gift from God and is meant to be used as part of *social interaction*, when dining or relaxing with others in fellowship and friendship, not for when we are by ourselves.
- b) Never drink when you feel *sad*. Do so only when you are happy. As above, alcohol is only meant for fellowship, not for "drowning your sorrows". Besides, alcohol is actually a *depressant* and it only lifts the mood of those who are *already happy*. Contrary to what many assume, it actually further depresses those who are feeling down to begin with.
- c) Don't drink in the *daytime* unless it is a very special occasion, such as a wedding, or in some other exceptional situation. Due to the way the human liver was created, it processes alcohol twice as

effectively in the evening than in the morning or afternoon. Thus, alcohol consumed before about 7pm will be twice as potent and will make you drunk far more quickly.

- d) Have at least two whole days per week when you don't drink at all. This will give your liver some recovery time. It will also prove that you are not dependent on alcohol, which you should never allow yourself to become. If you feel any withdrawal symptoms when you have a day off from drinking, or if you *crave* for a drink, or feel that you "*need it*", then stay off it even longer, or even permanently. Force your body to do without it and reassert the authority that your will has over your body and emotions. They need to be shown who the boss is.
- e) Never drink *to please others* or because *they want you to*, especially if they try to pressurise you. Only drink when *you* want to, and only with the type, quantity, strength and frequency of drink that you want. Therefore, never try to "*keep up*" or "*fit in*" or to meet others' expectations or satisfy peer pressure. What you drink, and when, and how much, is entirely a matter for you, not other people.
- f) Be sensitive to others who are present who might have a 'drink problem', even where you aren't sure, but only suspect it to be so. In such situations don't drink anything yourself, so as to avoid putting temptation in their way and also to show solidarity if they are struggling to exercise self-control.
- g) Never drink to the extent that your speech, reaction time or motor skills, are in any way affected. Ideally, except on special occasions, stay within the drink driving limits for England and Wales. (not Scotland or the EU - their limits are needlessly strict)

These simple guidelines will make sure that you never have any problems with alcohol or allow yourself to become dependent on it. Above all, they will greatly reduce the chances of you ever becoming drunk, which is the key thing to avoid.

Fools are useless and unreliable, especially as employees.

We should avoid employing fools to work for us, i.e. those who have a substantial amount of foolishness in their character. I am not referring to people who in any way, or at any time, display even traces of foolishness. Otherwise, none of us could ever employ anybody at all, not even ourselves. Fools make ineffective and unreliable staff and will cause us grief. I have never had a profitable experience employing a fool. They are always a disappointment and it always ends badly:

⁶He cuts off his own feet and drinks violence

Who sends a message by the hand of a fool.

⁷Like the legs which are useless to the lame,

So is a proverb in the mouth of fools.

⁸Like one who binds a stone in a sling,

So is he who gives honour to a fool.

⁹Like a thorn which falls into the hand of a drunkard,

So is a proverb in the mouth of fools.

¹⁰Like an archer who wounds everyone,

So is he who hires a fool or who hires those who pass by.

Proverbs 26:6-10 (NASB)

I learned, from a series of bitter experiences, that it is useless trying to train or discipline staff who are fools. They were not interested in learning how to do their jobs better, or raising their standards or serving clients properly. Therefore, everything I tried to do to train and improve them was unsuccessful, as they paid no attention. Conversely, with wise and teachable staff, one only needed to have a quiet

word with them and they would listen and benefit from it. King Solomon obviously had the same experiences in trying to manage fools:

“The words of the wise heard in quiet are better than the shouting of a ruler among fools.”
Ecclesiastes 9:17 (ESV)

What are you really like as an employee? Are you thoroughly reliable? Are you sensible? Do you put the client/patient/customer ahead of yourself? Do you serve your boss faithfully and loyally, even if he doesn't treat you well? Do you treat colleagues fairly? Can they always count on you, or do you let the side down? Are you emotionally stable? Does your firm make a profit or a loss from employing you? Do you save management time or waste it? Are you an asset or a liability? Have you ever asked yourself any of these blunt questions? If not, it is unlikely that you are a good employee.

Many people in churches are fools.

One might ask how a real Christian, or even a mere churchgoer, can be a fool. Aren't fools meant to say *"there is no God"*? Or, at least, aren't they meant to live as if there was no God? Therefore, how can people do either of those things and still go to church? How can they be so inconsistent, or hypocritical, as to act the way they do, where they are real Christians? The short answer is that it's actually not difficult at all to behave inconsistently. At any rate, it is certainly not unusual. Millions of people find it very easy indeed.

Many fools, and even wicked people, belong to churches but live in a worldly way. Yet they are usually completely unchallenged by the leaders. Indeed, many such foolish, and even wicked, people are leading churches themselves. Another reason why foolish people claim to believe in God and yet behave wrongly is that, as we saw above, many redesign or redefine God so as to make Him into someone more acceptable to themselves, indeed, usually into a replica of themselves.

So, a liberal might want to focus on God's love because, that feature (as they wrongly understand it) happens to appeal to them. They like the sound of those aspects of God's nature, at least as they imagine them to be. However, they dislike any talk of God's wrath or judgment. To deal with that problem of Him having attributes which they don't like, they simply 'rebrand' God, or redefine Him, to remove any mention of His judgment or holiness. Then they focus solely on the features they do like, as if the Bible was a self-service buffet bar.

They then put onto their 'plate' whatever they like, but leave off it anything that sounds uncomfortable, or is convicting. They simply pick and choose what they *want to believe* and ignore or reject the rest, and see nothing wrong in doing so. I have pointed out this practice to a number of people. Some appear to be unaware, and even unconcerned, that they do this. Others are aware, but try to justify it. Such a person does not want the real God of the Bible. They want a false god that they can design and build for themselves.

That being so, what God, or rather what *god*, do they actually have? It depends on the precise circumstances and on how far they go in editing out those parts of God's character that they don't like. However, they may easily end up with a completely false god, who is entirely of their own making instead of the real God who is revealed in the Bible. That may sound a harsh thing to say, but isn't it clearly true? Many say, for example, that the god they believe in:

- a) is not angry at sin
- b) is not going to judge anyone
- c) will not condemn anyone
- d) will not send anyone to the Lake of Fire

- e) did not create us and does not own us
- f) does not have the right to tell us how to live
- g) has entirely changed his mind on issues of sexuality and gender since the Bible was written

Sometimes the god they manufacture is angry about sin, but only at certain types of sin, i.e. the ones which *they personally disapprove of*, such as financial corruption, racism, or 'homophobia', as they call it. Their god is never angry about other sins such as abortion, promiscuity or homosexuality, which the Bible condemns, but which *they* don't consider to be wrong. It is remarkable how many people design a god who shares all their own personal opinions and preferences, instead of allowing the real God to *describe Himself* through the pages of the Bible.

If a person has any of the false beliefs listed above, then how can the god they believe in possibly be the real God of the Bible? So, if they do hold those wrong beliefs about God, then what does that make that person? Are they a fool? Are they even a real Christian? Again, it depends on all the circumstances and on how far they go in their errors and unbelief. Merely to lack some particular piece of knowledge, or to make an error about God's character or intentions, does not necessarily mean that we therefore have a false god or that we are a fool. That must be so because none of us has a complete understanding of God.

However, many go far beyond mere gaps in their knowledge and end up with such a distorted view of God that what they have is not even remotely like the true God of the Bible. For some their perception of God is so false that they must either be fools, or close to it. At any rate, whether they are fools or not, what they believe in may well be a false god, because it is such a misrepresentation, or caricature, of the real God. That helps to explain why so many people's lives are in such a mess. They reject what the real God says and follow their own home-made god who shares all their own opinions.

Nobody is 100% foolish. We are all a mixture.

People do not fit into neatly defined groups, such that wise people are wise all the time and are never foolish or naïve. Therefore, it is wrong to assume that if a person is a fool that must mean he thinks and acts in a foolish way all the time, in every part of his life. If that was true it would mean that if a person ever does or says anything wise they cannot be a fool, and if they ever say anything naïve or foolish then they can't be wise. That's the wrong way to see this.

The reality is much more complicated and changeable. None of us are ever 100% anything. We are all a blend of wise, simple, foolish and wicked characteristics. The real question is in what proportions? Are we mainly foolish or mainly wise? And, more importantly, in which direction are we travelling? Moreover, are we wiser in some parts of our lives but more foolish in others? For example, we might be relatively wise in the way we do our job, or run a business, but relatively foolish in the way we treat our wife or children. Or it could be the other way round.

Alternatively, we might be wise in our drinking habits, but foolish when it comes to gambling. We each have stronger and weaker areas of our lives, where we show more or less wisdom, maturity or sense. So, we need to be a good deal more flexible and sophisticated when deciding who is wise, and who is foolish or simple etc. A better way to put the question would be "*Is that person generally/mainly foolish?*" Or "*Is that person mainly/usually wise?*" Or, concerning specific incidents, we could say "*Is that person thinking/behaving in a foolish way at the moment?*"

That is a more meaningful and realistic way in which to approach this subject. It will also help to prevent us from being overly simplistic and from categorising other people, and ourselves, too glibly and hastily. Another vital point is that when the Bible refers to fools, and to foolish thoughts or behaviour, *it is referring to you and me, not just to others*. There is not a person on this Earth, not even

the most mature Christian, who has not been naïve, foolish, and perhaps even wicked, on many occasions.

Moreover, we still display those traits, even now, and will continue to do so until the day we die and are at last set free from our sinful, flesh nature. The reason the Bible says so much about naivety, foolishness and wickedness is because those descriptions are frequently applicable *to us*, not just to other people. The foolish people are not “*that group over there*”. At times they are you, me, and all the people we know. So, when God speaks of these faults He is speaking to you and me, not just to other people.

We cannot therefore switch off and skim-read those parts of the Bible which address these character faults, as if they were only of relevance to other people. Some of us think, without ever saying it out loud, “*I am a Christian, so that automatically means I am wise, unlike those non-Christians over there who are foolish and wicked. Thank goodness I’m not like them.*” Therefore, what the Bible has to say about foolishness, naivety and wickedness *is* of relevance to you. Those traits *are* present in you, at least from time to time, and need to be removed.

Realistically, however, our aim should not be to change overnight from a fool into a wise person, but to bring gradual change to each of the parts of our character, like renovating a derelict old house. You may get to the point where one of the rooms is starting to look quite good, but the others still aren’t any better. That is a more accurate reflection of how we really are. So we need to keep on pursuing wisdom until every ‘room’, or every part of us, is mainly/usually wise, or at least wiser than it was, or more frequently than it was.

A wise person can learn valuable lessons from absolutely anyone, even if they are a fool, and indeed, even if they are wicked. At the very least, one can learn how *not to think*, how *not to behave*, and how things should *not be done*. Therefore, if you are beginning to be wise and want to be wiser still, you can learn almost as much from bad colleagues, bad bosses, and even bad pastors, as you can from good ones. They are all there to be watched and heard, and can all be treated as living demonstrations, illustrating what goes wrong when a person thinks, speaks or behaves foolishly.

In a certain sense, therefore, it can be a blessing when God allows foolish people to come into our lives as colleagues, bosses or fellow church members. It gives us an opportunity, albeit one we did not seek, to learn from observation how *not* to live and what *not* to do. If it were not for being able to observe such people at close quarters you would either have to learn those lessons directly from Scripture, or from taking advice, which can be hard to find. Or we would have to do so from making those same foolish errors and bad decisions ourselves.

But that would mean learning from our own pain and suffering, rather than from other people’s, which is far easier. Accordingly, look for events and situations arising in the lives of others. That way we can learn valuable life lessons at *their expense*, rather than our own. That is not an argument for seeking to make friends with fools or to spend more time with them by choice. But it is an argument for taking every opportunity to learn lessons from the things that are said and done by those fools whom we have *no choice but to be with*.