

CHAPTER TWO

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)

*A fool takes no pleasure in understanding,
but only in expressing his opinion.
Proverbs 18:2 (RSV)*

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

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

¹⁴ The unspiritual man does not receive the gifts of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.

1 Corinthians 2:14 (RSV)

¹⁸ Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. ¹⁹ For the wisdom of this world is folly with God. For it is written, "He catches the wise in their craftiness," ²⁰ and again, "The Lord knows that the thoughts of the wise are futile."

1 Corinthians 3:18-20 (RSV)

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

*The way of a fool is right in his own eyes,
But a wise man is he who listens to counsel.
Proverbs 12:15 (NASB)*

*Poverty and shame will come to him who neglects discipline,
But he who regards reproof will be honoured.
Proverbs 13:18 (NASB)*

*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)*

*A foolish woman is noisy;
she is wanton and knows no shame.
Proverbs 9:13 (RSV)*

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

*Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler,
And whoever is intoxicated by it is not wise.
Proverbs 20:1 (NASB)*

*"Do not love sleep, lest you become poor.....
Proverbs 20:13(a) (NASB)*

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

*For the heavy drinker and the glutton will come to poverty,
And drowsiness will clothe one with rags.
Proverbs 23:21 (NASB)*

*Like snow in summer or rain in harvest,
so honour is not fitting for a fool.
Proverbs 26:1 (RSV)*

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 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 features of a person's life, i.e. whether or not they believe in God, value His Word and are aware of His impending judgment. However, assume for a moment that it is true that there is a God who has created the whole universe and that He has revealed in His Word that He intends to judge us. If so, then what could be more damaging to one's life than to deny, ignore, or be uninterested in, those profound facts?

If those things are true, then they are utterly fundamental to the whole of our lives. Therefore to deny them, or to be unaware of them or unconcerned about them, would inevitably cause us to go very wrong. We would miss the point on just about everything. So, when viewed in those terms, it would not seem unreasonable to label such a person as a fool.

Being a fool is all about attitudes, values, choices, priorities and relationships. Let's examine some of the key features of a fool and ask ourselves, frankly, to what extent do we display these? It is no use just assuming that when the Bible refers to fools it is talking about other people, as most of us do assume. The truth is it probably includes us much of the time.

Many people wrongly imagine themselves to be wise, but they have no actual basis for thinking that they are. They may be academic, successful, powerful or rich, but still have little or no wisdom. Such people are in danger of making the mistake of *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)

They may be under the illusion that because of their success in some field, or because of their wealth or qualifications, they are self-sufficient and do not need God or His Word. They are proud and haughty. Therefore Isaiah says "woe" to them because their attitude makes it certain 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 perfectly capable of displaying these proud and foolish attitudes.

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. It seems to be a condition which we are generally incapable of recognising in ourselves. Ironically, to be capable of seeing the foolishness that is still present 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 would be shocked to discover that that is how He sees us.

A person may be clever, highly qualified, and have a good job. They may even go to church and claim to be a Christian. They may even be a real Christian. But none of that prevents a person from being a fool by the biblical definition. We therefore have to examine ourselves 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. But please don't be offended by my suggesting the possibility to you. Be willing to look at this issue with brutal honesty. Ask God to show you whether you are a fool 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 then 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 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 wisdom *does not matter to him*, not that he hates or dislikes it. He has no desire to be instructed, at least not in the things that God wants us to know:

⁷The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge;

***Fools despise wisdom and instruction.
Proverbs 1:7 (NASB)***

***³³Wisdom 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 abilities or possessions. They are self-satisfied and overly self-assured. Instead, what they should do is 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 complacent about the things that God wants us to be alarmed about:

***³²For the waywardness of the naive will kill them,
And the complacency of fools will destroy them.
Proverbs 1:32 (NASB)***

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

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

Apostle Paul also spoke of this in his letter to the Romans. He explained how God's existence is obvious, not least because of all that He has created. Yet, people choose not to honour God or to acknowledge Him. As a consequence of this rejection of God, those people degenerate. They become futile in their thinking and are turned into fools. So, the chain of causation works both ways. A man says that 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

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

Some fools go so far as to *deny* God's existence outright. Others merely *ignore* God, even if they are willing to concede that He exists. But all fools create gods of their own making, which they then put in God's place. Indeed, this is something which we are all capable of doing, even if we are real Christians. Therefore we need to guard against it, because if we allow anything to 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 basically anything at all which you allow to take God's place. That then begs the questions "*what is God's place?*" One could define God's place as:

- a) to be *worshipped*. No other person or thing may ever receive our worship
- b) to be in 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*

Therefore if, any person or thing in your life ever falls within a) to 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 people who create idols from wood and metal and then bow down and worship them. He speaks of their behaviour in scathing terms and views them as people who are blind and lack 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 may perhaps feel some complacency about this, because you have not made any idols from wood or metal. If so, think again, because we can be equally stupid and create just as many gods for ourselves as the Israelites of the Old Testament made. Our gods tend to be things like money, career, status, ambition, popularity, fame, celebrities, sports stars, sports in general, possessions, houses, cars etc. Any of those things can become a god to you if you allow it to take any one of those places set out at a) to c) above. They are a god if they are worshiped, have first place in your life, or are at the forefront of your thoughts and plans.

We see that the Chaldeans made a god out of their own power and might. They were famous for their military strength and that might, 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 that this too is something that only applied in ancient history. However, for centuries, Great Britain was the most powerful nation on earth. Its army, and especially its navy, won war after war and built the largest empire the world has ever seen. In the years before World War One, it was the policy of Great Britain always to ensure that its navy was more than large enough to defeat the next two biggest navies in the world combined, in case they ever formed an alliance. During those years many British people were proud of their military strength and it became a god to some of them.

The same is true today for some Americans, now that their country has become the world's only super power. It is difficult for us not to take pride in such things and 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. It is not merely something that *other people* do.

However, it is also possible to take the God of the Bible and to 'adjust' Him to such an extent that you end up creating for yourself a false god to put in His place. I have seen many people who have either done this or come close to doing so.

This happens where people, consciously or unconsciously, reject or ignore what God says about Himself in the Bible. They may dislike certain aspects of His nature or character. Therefore they just edit those features out and focus on other characteristics of God which they prefer, or which they are willing to accept. Or they even go so far as to invent characteristics for God which He does not have. They then decide for themselves that that is what He is like, as opposed to how He describes Himself in the Bible.

The classic example of this is where a person who is of a liberal or sceptical frame of mind redefines God and eliminates from Him such features 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 going so far as to create a false god of their own making to replace the 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 in every way. The things that God says about Himself in the Bible are rejected or ignored. The person then ends up worshipping a new god which is, effectively, just a reflection of themselves.

When a person does this, as so many do, then he is not much less foolish than a man who worships a statue made of wood or stone. In each case the god is equally false and equally home-made. We must not be so complacent as to imagine ourselves to be immune to this kind of error. We are all in danger of going down this path 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 opinions and preferences and regardless of whether it suits their interests or is convenient. 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 Him other features which you would prefer Him to have.

God classified the majority of the Jewish people of Jeremiah's day as fools. It was not because they did not *believe* in Him, but because they did not *know* Him. They also ignored or undervalued His written Word and His verbal warnings via the prophet Jeremiah. In other words, they lived in a way which showed that God did not matter much to them:

***22 "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)***

A fool's main problem is his heart attitude, not his IQ. He basically does not value what God values. 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. Most fools never come to their senses or change for the better, whatever is done to them, or for them:

***22 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 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:

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

A fool generally over-estimates himself and is therefore content to stay as he is. He sees little or nothing wrong with himself and does not recognise his own character traits. Therefore he does not see any need to change. On the contrary, once a person becomes a fool, he usually just tends to

become more and more foolish. He even feeds on other people's foolishness and adds their folly to his own:

***14The 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 sat down and thought about your own faults? Indeed, have you ever done so at all? Foolishness is in all of us, at least to some extent. It will remain in us, and increase, 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 a fool and that you will continue to be one, at least in some areas of your life.

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

A fool prefers to maintain and express his own opinions, instead of trying to find out what God thinks:

***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. Therefore he may casually make vows to God or promises to other people that he does not keep and has no intention of keeping. Yet God will hold him accountable for all such words. He will also curse others which then brings God's curse down on him in return. And he will condemn or criticise others without having any adequate evidence, let alone proof. The problem is that for all such careless words, we will be held accountable and brought into judgment:

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 tend to bring him into deeper trouble, because his voice is 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)***

A fool does not learn from his mistakes, even when things go badly wrong and end in failure. Time and time again a fool will repeat the same behaviour pattern, or display the same attitude, which led to things going so wrong in the past:

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

The fool doesn't see that it is his own conduct, attitudes, ways and habits that are leading him into trouble and failure. He will automatically attribute his problems to other people, or to circumstances,

or to bad luck. What he will not do is to look at himself and ask whether *he himself* might be the cause of what is going wrong.

If he ever paused for a moment and asked himself that question he would be on the brink of making a major discovery that could lead to him ceasing to be a fool. Sadly very few fools ever do stop and ask themselves that question.

A fool is arrogant and careless, due to his lack of respect for God, and his inflated view of himself:

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

He is also quick tempered and lacks self-control and restraint. He will express his views too quickly, or too stridently, and he antagonises others unnecessarily:

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

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

***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. He bides His time, not just for years, but even for centuries, before He brings nations to judgment. God feels anger, but He does not have a *temper*. Therefore, He never loses His temper. Anger can be a godly emotion, but temper cannot. To lose one's temper is just a display of our fleshly nature. Therefore it is sin.

God's wisdom is so infinite that He can restrain His anger for as long as He chooses to. 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 have 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)

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

Also it is not always appropriate to display our knowledge or tell people what we think, even if we are right. A wise person knows when to stay silent but a fool doesn't. Therefore he makes 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)***

A fool will not accept correction or listen to advice:

Unwillingness to take advice or be corrected is one of the key characteristics of a fool. It is also perhaps the main reason why he tends to remain a fool. 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)*

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

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

Do you find that you dislike being rebuked or corrected? Do you react badly to it, even when what is said is true? In fact, do you tend to 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 willing, and even eager, to be corrected. Wise people positively look for correction and value it. That is one of the main reasons why they become wise, but it is also the result of their having already started to become wise.

For all his faults, one of the best qualities about former President Bill Clinton was that he welcomed correction. He deliberately gathered people around him who were brave enough to stand up to him and to constructively criticise him. He never resented it. On the contrary, he went out of his way to actively look for criticism. He wanted to get his policies as right as he could 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.

If we are wrong about some point or doctrine or some aspect of our attitude or behaviour, most of us would prefer to remain wrong rather than be corrected, especially if it has to be done in front of other people. But if we have the love of the truth then we will prefer to be corrected, and so to find the real truth, even if it means being embarrassed or diminished in the estimation of others.

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 tends to see himself as being right and not needing any advice:

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

He also tends to trust in his own abilities and his own mind. God regards that attitude as foolish:

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

When there is a dispute, or where there are conflicting needs, and insufficient resources to go round, most of us think as a fool does. We often automatically assume, without even pausing to think about it, that:

- a) we are obviously in the right,
- b) that our own need, or our own activity or project, is obviously the most important, and the most urgent,
- c) that if any wrong has been done, it has only ever been done *to us*, not *by us*.

Are any of these points true of you? Are you programmed like a computer with default-settings which always immediately assume (a) - (c) about yourself? Or, when you are in a conflict situation do you genuinely cross examine yourself to find out whether you are actually right? Do you force yourself to admit to yourself, and others, facts which would put you in the wrong, or which would show that your need, or your role, is less important than someone else's?

Such genuinely probing interrogation of oneself is exceptionally rare. Moreover, it only ever happens 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 Book Seven) The old man always puts himself first and will never change.

If we are to avoid leaping to these automatically selfish assumptions and reactions, then we must deliberately 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. They have a sinful, fleshly nature too. Therefore, unless we intervene to deliberately stop ourselves, we will instinctively respond in the same way and *give as good as we get*.

You could say that when we choose instead to act in the opposite spirit we are grabbing the microphone, or the steering wheel, from our old man and handing it to our *new man*, who was reborn within us 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*.

That will only occur if, with our will, we consciously choose to insist that our new man should have 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, and to let him speak for us, will never come naturally. However, 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, (including us), are genuinely willing to see themselves as being at fault. The same trait is in us all 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 for all of us, when we are operating in our flesh nature, is to deny all blame, regardless of the facts. We 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 that which everyone else can see very plainly.

Our flesh nature also regards as inherently wrong, and objectionable, anybody who is criticising us, however validly they may be doing so. The assumption that we are in the right is so widespread it is almost universal. But that attitude will do us a lot of damage. It will prevent us from learning or from

changing because we assume 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 at which I was not present but which I was told of. It involved persons A,B,C and D. Person A was quite obviously partly at fault. Yet they spoke only of the wrong which person D had done. Person A would not tolerate anything being said by anybody to contradict that, or to suggest that they bore any responsibility at all. In fact, person A had quite obviously contributed to the very difficult situation that had arisen. But they would not allow that to be said. The very idea of person A 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 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 choose to do what's right, if doing right means 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 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 led to him making a series of wrong choices and 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 allow this fear to 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 and on seeking His approval and never allow anybody at all to 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 fool tends to lives 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 are ignored, or 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. At least not if the aim is to enlighten him. It won't succeed. The fool will either get angry, or he will mock what is said. He will not listen, and he will not learn anything from it:

*⁹When 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, forlornly, to rebuke and correct fools. But they had no interest in listening to any corrections, and no desire to learn or to 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 realised that I need to focus all my energy on training those staff who genuinely want to learn and be instructed. That single discovery changed my life and altered the whole atmosphere of my business. I decided instead 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, but it is the only sensible way to operate, for the sake of the business, its clients, and the other staff.

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 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)*

Nothing valuable will 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 will only be 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)*

The fool is lazy. Moreover, he does not plan ahead or work to achieve his future goals:

Foolishness and laziness very frequently go together as a package. Many fools (by no means all) see no point in working hard and take no pleasure from work. They will do all they can to avoid difficulty and effort. It is closely linked to the fact that the fool does not look ahead. He tends to think only of the present, whereas a wise person focuses mainly 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 for it later doesn't appeal to him. Therefore he will lose out in the end when he has nothing to show for the time that has passed. He wastes 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)*

The fool has no regard for the concept of eternity.

A fool thinks even less about eternity. It does not matter to him. He does not even get around to considering it. This is linked to the fact that a fool has no regard for God, or for the Judgment. If you don't currently spend much time considering eternity in general, and judgment in particular, then you are being foolish, at least in that regard.

Therefore, one way to change, and to become generally wiser, is to force yourself to reflect on your own death and on the future judgment and eternity which will then begin. Time spent considering these momentous things will have a profound effect upon how you live now, and will alter all your priorities. This is one of the best ways that we can grow in wisdom and rid ourselves of our foolishness, grain by grain.

A fool is self-centred. He 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 difficult for any of us to avoid this. Such obsession with oneself and one's own needs is the natural attitude of our *old man* and is ingrained in all of us. I trained my staff about this tendency to be self-centred. I referred to it as having a *wrong astronomy*, i.e. assuming that we ourselves are at the centre of the universe and that our 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 fleshly instincts. We must 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 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 to say as a slogan but it is hard to do. It is 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 start 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. You have to keep on reminding yourself of your correct place, which must always be at the edge of any situation you are in. You are not at the centre of anything. If you are, then you have a wrong view of yourself and of your place in the world.

I once interviewed a young woman of 22 named Emily who wanted to become a trainee solicitor. She had just graduated. 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 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 pay nothing for such trial periods and treat it as work experience for the candidate. The purpose of the trial was just for us to assess them, not for them to help us.

She 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 Emily 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 scarce and hard to get. To my surprise she began to cry and complained that she felt 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*" for us to keep her on trial!

I would have been amazed by that reaction years ago, but I have come to learn that it is a very common attitude. Her problem was that she was profoundly self-centred and proud. Therefore it was an intolerable blow to her ego 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 her own way.

She had never had her self-centeredness challenged by anybody before, not even by her parents or teachers. They had therefore helped to make her into a fool. The trial period was brought to a swift end and she was sent home. Even then, she still saw nothing inappropriate in what she had said. Her focus was so entirely upon herself, and on what she wanted, that she really thought that she was being mistreated. She felt that we had wronged her, merely by not approving of her immediately and appointing her to a permanent job.

A fool 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 give no thought to, what God wants, or what is best for their local community or for the nation. Such altruistic considerations rarely come into it.

That is why very few politicians today even bother appealing to our generosity or sense of civic duty. They know that most of us are only interested in ourselves. So 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 own 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. So, if we are a Christian, and if our thinking is self-centred, then we need to acknowledge that fact and 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 to 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.

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 waste our time associating with fools, or with people who are more foolish than ourselves. Firstly it will not lead to anything worthwhile. You cannot learn much of any value from a fool, except by noting his bad habits and seeking to avoid them in yourself. He has very little to offer you. But he will not learn from you either, because he has no desire to do so.

Secondly, regardless of what group we primarily belong to at present, it is a law of the universe that we will inevitably become like the people we spend most of our time with. 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 any other group:

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

*²⁴Do 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)*

*Leave the presence of a fool,
for there you do not meet words of knowledge.
Proverbs 14:7 (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 the wise. They actually 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, as a result of being with people who are wiser than you.

Change for the better will always feel difficult while it is happening. Moreover, the benefit of such change only becomes apparent later, which is 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:

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

If you aren't yet a fully developed fool, and don't want to become one, then make sure you avoid spending time with fools. Likewise, if you are behaving foolishly 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 wants us to make careful choices to associate, where possible, only with those people who are likely to be a good influence to 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:

***⁴Do not answer a fool according to his folly,
Or you will also be like him.***

Proverbs 26:4 (NASB)

But verse 5 says:

***⁵Answer a fool as his folly deserves,
That he not be wise in his own eyes.***

Proverbs 26:5 (NASB)

In fact, there is no contradiction. What these two verses mean is:

- a) do *not* sink to the same level as a fool by answering him in the same foolish, carnal way in which *he speaks to you*. If you do, you will become like him. But,
- b) *do* answer him in the way he *deserves*, i.e. by sidestepping or ignoring him. Don't waste 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.

Fools gossip and they cannot be trusted with secrets

Fools lack self-control. They also have a craving to be seen as important. Therefore if they feel they can appear important, or gain approval in the eyes of others, by disclosing private or confidential information, then they will do so. Therefore a fool can't be trusted with secrets, whether they are 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)

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 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 raising their standards or serving clients properly. Therefore all that I tried to do to train them and improve them was futile. Conversely, with wise and teachable staff, one only had to have a quiet word with them and they would listen and benefit from what was said to them. 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 with loyalty, 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 and able to control yourself? 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 ruthlessly interrogated yourself with blunt questions such as these? If you haven't, then it is unlikely that you are a very good employee.

There are many people in churches who 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, aren't they at least supposed 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, even where they are real Christians?

The short answer is that it's actually not difficult at all to behave inconsistently. Millions of people worldwide, but especially in the West, find it very easy indeed. Many fools, and even wicked people, belong to churches but live in a worldly way. They usually go completely unchallenged by those who lead those churches. Indeed, many such foolish, and even wicked, people are leading churches themselves.

Another explanation for why foolish people can so easily claim to believe in God and yet behave wrongly is that, as we saw above, many of them redesign or redefine God so as to make Him into someone more acceptable to themselves. So, a person who is of a liberal frame of mind might say that they want to focus on God's love. They might do so because, that feature of God's love (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, you will find that they tend to dislike any talk of God's wrath or judgment.

So, to deal with that problem they simply 'rebrand' God. In other words, they redefine Him so as to remove any mention of His judgment or holiness. Then they focus solely on the features they do like. They treat the Bible as if it was a buffet bar. They go round it putting onto their plate whatever things they like the look of, but leaving off their plate anything that sounds uncomfortable, or is convicting, or which speaks of God's anger about our sin.

They simply pick and choose what they want to believe and ignore or reject the rest. They see nothing wrong in doing so. I have debated this practice with people who operate that way. Some of them appear to be quite unaware, and even unconcerned, that they are doing this. Others are well aware that they do it but they try to justify it. This is not just theory. I have personally met and spoken to many people in churches who behave in these ways. The problem is that such a person does not want the real God of the Bible. They want a false god that they can design for themselves.

That being so, what God or 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, such a person may easily end up with a completely false god of their own making instead of the real God

who is revealed in the Bible. That may sound a harsh thing to say of them, but isn't it clear that that is true? Many people say, for example, that the god they believe in:

- a) is not angry at sin
- b) alternatively, he is only angry at certain types of sin, i.e. the kind of things of which they personally disapprove, such as financial corruption, or racism, or *'homophobia'*, as they insist on calling it. However, their god is not at all angry about other sins, such as abortion, promiscuity or homosexuality, which the Bible condemns, but which they themselves don't consider to be wrong.
- c) is not going to judge anyone
- d) will not condemn anyone
- e) will not send anyone to the Lake of Fire
- f) did not create us and does not own us
- g) does not have the right to tell us how to live.

It's remarkable how many people therefore end up designing for themselves a false god who shares all their own personal opinions, priorities and preferences. They do so instead of simply allowing the real God to describe Himself through the pages of the Bible. If a person has any or all of the false beliefs listed above, then how can the god that 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. The truth is that none of us has a complete understanding of God. However, many people in our churches go far beyond just having gaps in their knowledge. They end up with such a profoundly distorted and incomplete view of God that what they have is not even remotely like the true God of the Bible.

For some of those people their perception of God is so badly mistaken or false that they must either be fools or close to being fools. At any rate, whether they are fools or not, what they have may well be a false god, because it is such an inaccurate misrepresentation, or caricature, of the real God. That helps to explain why so many people's lives are in such a mess, because they will not accept what the real God says.

Nobody is 100% foolish. We are all a mixture

A major mistake that many of us make is to assume that people fit into neatly defined groups, such that wise people are wise all the time and are never foolish or naïve. Likewise, it is assumed that if a person is to be called a fool, that means 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 or insightful then they cannot be a fool. Conversely, it would mean that if a person ever says anything naïve or foolish then they can't be wise, and so on. That's the wrong way to see this. The reality is much more complicated and changeable.

None of us are 100% anything. We all consist of a blend of wise, simple, foolish and wicked characteristics. The real question is in what proportions? Are we mainly foolish or mainly wise? Also, 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 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 we are looking at the question of who is wise and who is foolish or simple etc. A better way to put the question would be to say “*Is that person generally/mainly foolish?*” Or “*Is that person mainly/usually wise?*” Alternatively, 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 help to prevent us from being overly simplistic and from categorising other people, and ourselves, too glibly and hastily.

Another vitally important point to take on board, before we begin to look in detail at the four character types, is that when the Bible refers to fools and to foolish thoughts or behaviour *it is referring to you and me*. Likewise, when the Bible refers to people who are simple/naïve, it includes you and me. 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 we will continue to do so until we die and are set free from our sinful, fleshly nature.

The reason the Bible says so much about naivety, foolishness and wickedness is because those descriptions are 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 switch off and skim-read those parts of the Bible such as the book of Proverbs which address these character faults, as if they were only of relevance to other people.

Many people think, albeit 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. It is rather 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 aren't yet any better. That is how we are. So we need to keep pursuing wisdom until every 'room' or every part of us is mainly/usually wise, or at least wiser than it was.

To achieve that we are told to study the Bible, to avoid the company of fools, and to spend our time instead with the wise and the simple. But who exactly are these two groups that we are supposed to mix with and how can we identify them? Let’s now look more closely at what it means to be wise and then at what it means to be simple