

Proverbs: The Fool

Proverbs...

- A stitch in time saves nine.
- Let sleeping dogs lie
- Too many cooks spoil the broth
- A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush
- The early bird catches the worm
- There's no use crying over spilt milk
- If you play cricket for England, you're bound to lose...

Proverbs – they're pithy saying that contain great wisdom. Proverbs is a book which describes the real world. And it's full of great principles for the nitty gritty of every day life. And you'll know if you've read through Proverbs that most of it's not like the rest of the Bible. Apart from the first nine chapters, there's no argument, there's no story, there's just loads of jumbled up little observations about life. Because that's what life is like – it doesn't happen in a logical order – one minute you might have to deal with this problem – the next minute you've got to handle this person.

And scattered through the Proverbs are certain individuals who keep popping up again and again. Someone has described Proverbs like a photo album – you know if you look through a photo album you'll keep seeing the same people popping up – there's uncle Pete on the beach, and look there he is at Christmas with his santa hat on, and look there he is again covered in mud. Same person in different situations.

Well we're to look at the snaps of a few character throughout the photo album, throughout Proverbs, we're going to look at the sluggard, and the friend, but tonight we're going to look at a character called the fool.

Now to start with we're asking the question – who is he? what makes a fool a fool? What is it about the fool that makes him a fool? And we need to be careful here that we don't misunderstand Solomon, king Solomon wrote most of the Proverbs, and we need to be careful when he refers to the fool. Because the way we sometimes use the word there's something a bit funny or amusing about it –

- We talk about someone acting the fool
- Or playing the fool
- Or fooling around
- Or making a fool of themselves

And often we don't mean anything particularly serious – we just mean someone's having a laugh or a bit of fun – amusing but harmless.

Well nothing could be further from the meaning the fool in Proverbs. To be fool is to have a serious problem. So what is it about him?

1. In his heart he's godless.

Which means to start with that

He always goes his own way and never God's way.

If you've still got it open there just glance at ch1v7:

Proverbs1:7

⁷ The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge,
but fools despise wisdom and discipline. (NIV)

Now really this is *the* fundamental verse of the entire book of Proverbs. If we miss *out* Proverbs 1 verse 7, then we'll *misunderstand* the entire book. Because it's telling us that wisdom, knowledge, isn't primarily a matter of how much you know in your head – it's matter of what's going on in your heart. In other words you can be extremely clever, and yet extremely foolish. Because the fools problem is not intellectual – it's spiritual: **The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge**, of wisdom.

So what does it mean to fear God? Well it means to recognize God for who he is – he is God Almighty, the one who made everything, the one who rules everything, the one who will judge everyone.

- And so the person who fears God is grateful to him – thank you for making me he says to God
- And the person who fears God is obedient to him – I know you rule me he says he says to God
- And the person who fears God respects and worships him – I know you'll judge me – I'm accountable to you.

In other words the person who fears God wants to learn how to go God's way in life – he loves God, he obeys God, he reveres God – and so he wants to learn to be wise in the way he lives – he wants to live God's way. At the end of the day what counts is not what other people think of the way he lives – it what God thinks of his life that matters – that's the person who fears God.

But not the fool. Do you see v7, the fool doesn't fear God. The mark of the fool is that he **despises wisdom and discipline**. Because he doesn't fear God. In other words the fool models his life on Genesis chapter 3 – when Adam and Eve said to themselves – no I don't think we'll go God's way, let's do our thing.

Or as Proverbs 12:15 says -

¹⁵ The way of a fool seems right to him,
but a wise man listens to advice. (NIV)

So do you see the fool won't listen to God or godly advice. The fool is the non-Christian – the person who says actually God is not my ruler, I'll live life my way. That's the fool, he always goes his own way and never God's.

And he sins and never repents

The fool is someone who loves his sin, he loves his way of life – he can't see anything wrong with it. Or as Proverbs26:11 puts it:

¹¹ As a dog returns to its vomit,
so a fool repeats his folly.

So picture the scene – it's Saturday night, it's the centre of town, there's a stray dog wandering the streets and as he's sniffing about he comes across a half eaten kebab that someone's thrown away. He wolfs it down but then something disagrees with him and he vomits it straight back up again. Well it's been a busy night, there's plenty of

other litter to investigate so the dog wanders off but soon enough the smell of his vomit attracts him back.

- And he takes a little sniff
- And then another
- And then a little lick
- And then another little lick
- And then he's lapping it up

It's pretty unpleasant isn't it? Are you feeling sick? I'm feeling sick just describing it – but that's the way the writer wants us to feel about the person who just can't stop repeating his sins –

*As a dog returns to its vomit,
so a fool repeats his folly.*

I know I shouldn't do that – she says. I'm never going to do it again – ever. But after a while the whiff of temptation returns – and instead of being disgusted, she has a little sniff at it and pretty soon she's been enticed again.

Do you see it's a picture of being enslaved to sin. No there's no hope for that kind of fool – As 27:22 puts it:

*²² Though you grind a fool in a mortar,
grinding him like grain with a pestle,
you will not remove his folly from him.*

If you've got the right tools – a pestle and a mortar – then with bit of strength you can grind grain and separate the grain from the husk. But no amount of effort or rebuke or punishment will separate a fool from his folly. He always sins and he never repents.

Which should make us ask the question – well then how can a fool ever change? It's a good question – and we're going to come back to it in a bit.

But there's something else about this godless fool, it this: then when things start to go wrong for him...

He blames God and never himself.

Proverbs 19v3

*³ A man's own folly ruins his life,
yet his heart rages against the LORD.*

That's the fool – he won't fear God, yet he's willing to blame God when he gets himself into trouble.

So do you see the fool isn't a funny character in the Proverbs. He's a godless immoral character and Solomon wants us to be appalled at him. He wants us to be horrified by the fool and to say to ourselves I don't want to be like that. I don't want my family to be like that – I don't want my kids to be like that – I don't want my friends to be like that.

So we've looked at what makes a person a fool. But how would you spot a fool? If you met him, how would you know him? Well the answer of Proverbs is that you can spot the fool by what he says.

2. In his speech he's stupid

That's what the Proverbs say and they say that...

it's his words which give him away.

In fact as Proverbs 17:28 puts it

²⁸ Even a fool is thought wise if he keeps silent,
and discerning if he holds his tongue.

If the fool he keeps his mouth shut, he might just pass himself off as someone wise – but of course that is the very thing the fool cannot do: Proverbs 18v2 –

² A fool finds no pleasure in understanding
but delights in airing his own opinions.

In other words the fool is no good at camouflage – he can't go under cover – he always he gives himself away because he can't keep quiet.

- His basic assumption about you is that you want to listen to him.
- And his basic assumption about himself is that he thinks he's worth listening to.

So it doesn't matter what you're talking about, it doesn't matter what's being discussed, the fool always has something to say, he's always an expert.

And I wonder if our foolishness can linger on into our Christian lives sometimes?

Because the opinionated fool is a menace in a church. He's not teachable – do you see that in v2 – he **finds no pleasure in understanding**. And so in the small group he never shuts up to hear what insights others in the group might have, he never reads a good Christian book and he never asks for advice. And because he **delights in airing his own opinions** he breeds a critical spirit: he's much more likely to criticize the Bible study leader or the preacher than he is to weigh the words of the Bible: not that this preacher isn't grateful for feed back and criticism – but you know what I mean.

It's been well said hasn't it that we've got two ears and one mouth and they're to be used in that proportion. Whereas the fool switches it – he's much more likely to be talking than trying to listen and understand. And the problem with that is – next thing –

his words lack wisdom.

Proverbs 15:14

¹⁴ The discerning heart seeks knowledge,
but the mouth of a fool feeds on folly.

That's why he's not worth listening to. My brother and his wife were staying with me last week and my sister in law was trying to explain the weight watchers diet to me. Apparently it's all about being allowed a certain number of points a day. But I didn't really get it because what do points mean? Points mean prizes and to me prizes mean chocolate. She even left the dieting programme in my study – not sure what she was trying to say – but I was flicking through it and it's all very carefully worked out so that you eat healthily. Because if you don't eat well it affects your weight and your health.

And that's the point in v14 the fool doesn't eat well. He's on a bad diet. His food is folly. **the mouth of a fool feeds on folly**. Which is why his words lack wisdom.

So do you see what v14's saying – it's saying don't be like that: be the kind of person who is always hungry for knowledge, seek it, look for it, feed on it, and then you'll have something to say worth listening to, then you'll be able to help others and encourage them, and inform them and challenge them. Healthy output requires healthy input and so **The discerning heart seeks knowledge,**

And I've put it up on the screen but actually it's not quite true that the fool's words always lack wisdom. Because sometimes he does stumble across something true. But when he does, look what chapter 26 v7 says it's like -

**⁷ Like a lame man's legs that hang limp
is a proverb in the mouth of a fool.**

Do you see the picture? A lame man's legs might look alright, but if he tried to walk on them he'd fall flat. That's like a proverb when a fool says it. It's right, it's the truth.

- But it falls flat, it's useless, because no one takes any notice. Why should they? Every one can tell from his life that he's not worth listening to. So when he does stumble across wisdom no one listens. Which makes you think of the politician who campaigns on the moral high ground – back to basics – but then he's caught in adultery. Or the judge who dresses someone down for dangerous driving, but then he and tests positive for alcohol. Or more uncomfortably close to home – the Bible teacher who teaches one thing, and then does another.

The point is that it's not enough merely to be able to quote the Bible, to memorise these proverbs – sure your words might sound wise – but what's the use of wisdom if it's not at work.

So – in general the fools words lack wisdom – which makes it very difficult to relate to him. And so the Proverbs tell us to

Take care in his company.

So just turn with me to Chapter 26 and verses 4 and 5 – it's not on the screen this because we need to see these two proverbs side by side:

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

**⁵ Answer a fool according to his folly,
or he will be wise in his own eyes.**

So here is how to have a discussion with a fool. And sometimes it's said that these two verses are just saying it's impossible to have a discussion with a fool you can't win:

- If you answer him you'll get dragged into his folly
- And if you don't answer him he won't be helped.

So what do you do? It's a lose lose situation.

But I'm not sure that that's the point – I don't know if I'm right, see what you think.

I think it's saying – look if you find yourself talking to a fool then there is a wrong way to answer him and a right way to answer him.

- It would be wrong verse v4 to answer him according to his folly in the sense of copying his mockery, or his scorn, or his insults or exaggerations. Don't do that or you will be like him yourself.
- But that doesn't mean you shouldn't answer him at all. Do you remember the way Jesus answered his opponents in the gospels? He didn't do it nastily – but he took up their foolish questions and turned them back on his opponents And in that sense he **Answered the fools according to their folly**, so that they wouldn't be **be wise in their own eyes**.

The point is we need to take care when we're in conversation with a fool. And in fact in general the Proverbs advise us to steer clear – Proverbs14:7

**⁷ Stay away from a foolish man,
for you will not find knowledge on his lips.**

Which brings us to our third point about the fool:

3. In his company we're at risk

The fool can be a dangerous character to hang around. To be a fool is to be a pain. And if you're spending time with him, you're taking a risk.

First of all he's unreliable.

So here's a proverb for the employer. I wonder if you're responsible for appointing staff or if you're interviewing someone for a job in the near future. Those character references are going to be crucial -
Proverbs26:10

**¹⁰ Like an archer who wounds at random
is he who hires a fool or any passer-by.**

Like an archer who wounds at random... Or in our day and age it's the madman with a gun – someone shooting into a crowd randomly – it's a nasty picture, people are going to get hurt. Well that's what the employer is like if he hires the fool:

- Fire a gun into a crowd and damage will be done.
- Hire a fool into a company and likewise damage will be done.

Because the fool causes problems – he'll let you down, he'll rub people up the wrong way, he won't listen, he won't learn, he knows it all already, he's impossible to manage and he's impossible to work with. Whatever you do, don't hire a fool. Hire a fool and you'll soon have to fire a fool.

Because the fool is unreliable. And if you employ him, you're taking a risk.

But next he's also unstable

Proverbs20:3

**³ It is to a man's honour to avoid strife,
but every fool is quick to quarrel.**

Do you see he's up for a fight. In other words some people are like petrol fumes – just strike a match and up they'll go. So the wise man will just be careful around the fool.

- He won't insult him

- He won't tease him
- He won't wind him up
- He'll even be careful about cracking jokes – they might be taken the wrong way.

It's a pain to have to be on guard like that isn't it – but that's just the way he is, he's unstable - **every fool is quick to quarrel.**

And in fact when he does quarrel it's not a pretty sight - Proverbs29:9

⁹ **If a wise man goes to court with a fool,
the fool rages and scoffs, and there is no peace.**

Do you see once the fool gets going it's impossible to have a peaceful rational discussion with him. Either he takes it all too seriously and rages, or he refuses to take it seriously at all and scoffs – tries to laugh it off.

Unreliable, unstable

and unstoppable.

Proverbs29:11

¹¹ **A fool gives full vent to his anger,
but a wise man keeps himself under control.**

A fool gives full vent to his anger, - that's why we're at risk in his company.

He can't keep himself under control. And we see it don't we

- Road rage
- There's air rage
- Office rage
- Parking rage

And the wise man is a complete contrast: **a wise man keeps himself under control.**

Literally – quiets it in the background. Which conjures up the picture of someone taking a fractious baby out of the room to soothe it. That's the wise man – when he feels his temper rising he goes off somewhere quiet to cool down.

Whereas here's the picture of the fool: Proverbs17:12

¹² **Better to meet a bear robbed of her cubs
than a fool in his folly.**

I was just reading an article this week about someone back packing in Canada, walking along a path and there was a rustle and a bear cub gamboled across the path. But then there was a crashing in the undergrowth as well – mother bear wasn't very far behind. He said that they didn't wait around to see her – they retreated at speed.

Well that's what we're to do when faced with an angry fool. There's no stopping him, there's no point, just retreat.

And so just turn to chapter 13 and verse 20 with me:

²⁰ **He who walks with the wise grows wise,
but a companion of fools suffers harm.**

That's the advice of the Proverbs – to choose our friends well

That's the fool – in his company, we're at risk.

We've seen what makes a fool – a godless heart

We've seen how to spot a fool – by his speech

We know we should avoid the fool – he's risky company

And last – we need to avoid becoming fools -

By his future we are warned.

Because sooner or later the fool runs into trouble.
Not just in the future.

There are problems for him in the present too

– so for example Proverbs 18:6

⁶ A fool's lips bring him strife,
and his mouth invites a beating.

Eventually the fool gets himself into trouble

But the biggest warning comes from his problems in the future

Back to chapter 1 and verse 32:

Proverbs 1:32

³² For the waywardness of the simple will kill them,
and the complacency of fools will destroy them

That is the warning of Proverbs – at the end of the day, the fool, the man or woman who won't fear God, will be destroyed. To the man or woman who says to God I'll go my way and not yours – to that man or woman, God says – then go your way and not mine.

The fool is headed for destruction and for hell.

And so Proverbs is saying, be warned.

And so just by way of conclusion ...

...I just want to ask – how should we respond – now we've met the fool how should we react? Well two things:

First of all there's no room for arrogance.

I wonder as we read those proverbs if certain people's faces popped into your head – some of the Proverbs sound very like people we know. And it's easy to laugh or look down. But just turn with me to Titus 3:3-5...p1199:

Titus 3:3-5

³ At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another.

There's no room for arrogance then – because what is true of the fool has been true of us too. And do you see how Paul goes on – how can a fool ever change? Do you remember we asked that - Well here is the answer, v4

⁴ But when the kindness and love of God our Saviour appeared, ⁵ he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, (NIV)

That's how a fool becomes wise, through the kindness and love of God.

In fact here is the advice of Proverbs again...

Proverbs 30:32

³² "If you have played the fool and exalted yourself,
or if you have planned evil,

clap your hand over your mouth!

So if we've been rescued from foolishness there's no room for arrogance.

And there's no room for complacency.

As we said these Proverbs were written by Solomon... and in the Gospel it's said of Jesus that one wiser than Solomon is here. Jesus is the ultimate wise man. If you want to avoid foolishness, if you want to become wise, he's the man to go to, he's the one we need.

So let's finish by turning to some words of Jesus – Jesus came to make us wise. And look what he says in Matthew 7:24-27, p972. Why don't we read it together...

Matthew 7:24-27

²⁴ "Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. ²⁵ The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. ²⁶ But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. ²⁷ The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash."

How do we grow in wisdom – we come to Jesus, and listen to him and put his words in to practice.