

The Five People of Proverbs

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Introduction

The book of Proverbs is an instruction manual in wisdom. The first chapter of the book makes it clear that the author's purpose is to impart wisdom and understanding. Its focus is primarily horizontal (human relationships), but it certainly address the vertical (divine relationships). As a horizontal book Proverbs has a description for everyone. There are many types of people described in the book of Proverbs. Most of them are set in contrast to one another. The righteous is contrasted with the wicked, the sluggard or slothful is contrasted with the diligent, the wise with the fool, etc. However, there are five characterizations that emerge in the book of Proverbs. These characterizations or classifications describe the conduct and behavior of the individual in general. They are the simple, scorner, fool, prudent, and wise. An examination of each of these characterizations will assist the believer in analyzing himself and others and enable him to encourage them and respond to them in a Biblical fashion.

The Simple

One of the first characters to be introduced in the book of Proverbs is the simple. Chapter seven is dedicated to the instruction of the “simple ones”. The simple in Proverbs refers to a stage of life. This stage of life is youth. The simple is often paralleled with the term youth.¹ Everyone starts life as a simple person. This is not a bad thing. It just means that all children are simple because they lack knowledge and experience. The simple person is naive. "The simple believeth every word:" Proverbs 14:15. Why is it that children will believe their parents when they are told about mythical characters like Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, and the Tooth Fairy? They are simple and naivety is one of their predominant characteristics.

Because of their gullibility and inability to analyze a situation in a mature fashion, the simple

¹ Deffinbaugh, Robert , *The Way of the Wise: Studies in the Book of Proverbs*, Biblical Studies Press, www.bible.org, 1996, page 24

are susceptible to fall prey to wickedness.² One of the most powerful forces in a young person's life is that of peer pressure. So many give in to the negative encouragement of their peers and become involved in all manner of wickedness.

Since the simple are very vulnerable to wickedness, great care must be taken by their authority to prevent destructive involvement. A recent advertising campaign by the Partnership for a Drug Free America has presented the idea that the greatest weapon in the war against drugs in young people is the involved parent.³ Involved parents who know where their kids are and what they are doing and who take tough measures to prevent their kids involvement in drugs are often successful. A continual theme through the book of Proverbs is the importance of family rules. The simple are continually reminded to take heed to the father's instruction and the mother's law. Accountability and structure in the home are important for simple young people.

Although the protection of authority is very important for the simple, the simple must also take his own precautions if he is to avoid the traps of wickedness. The warning is given to not forsake the limitations (landmarks) of the parents (Proverbs 22:28 and 23:10), but he must also be willing to establish limitations for himself. However, young people often do just the opposite. Instead of establishing limitations they push the limits and use as their motto, "How far can I go?"⁴ Sadly, they often push the limits to the point where they go over the line and become entrapped in all manner of vices. "A prudent man foreseeeth the evil and hideth himself: but the simple pass on, and are punished" Proverbs 22:3.

The stage of being simple is a crossroads in the life of the young person. It is during their simplicity that the foundations are being laid and the decisions are being made that will determine

2 Deffinbaugh, Robert , page 25

3 Partnership for a Drug Free America, http://www.drugfreeamerica.org/campaigns/campaing_view.asp, Internet, accessed May 7, 2004

4 Deffinbaugh, Robert, page 26

their future direction. The simple person will turn toward wisdom or folly. The purpose of Proverbs is to instruct in wisdom and warn against folly.

God takes a special interest in the simple person. The New Testament is loaded with passages that emphasize the Lord Jesus' concern with children and their instruction. Psalm 116:6 properly expresses God's relationship toward the simple. "The Lord preserveth the simple:" The Lord pays special attention to the development of the young person and continually preserves them. The word preserve comes from the Hebrew *shamar* and means to go on hedging about (as with thorns). It is a continual concern of Yahweh to protect the simple and keep them from falling into the traps of folly and direct them toward wisdom. The most important thing for the simple is God's Word. The Bible makes the simple wise. Psalm 19:7 "The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul: the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple." Psalm 119:130 "The entrance of thy words giveth light; it giveth understanding unto the simple." All parents should do their best to saturate their children with the Word of God through whatever means possible. The Word of God is the young person's only hope of attaining wisdom and avoiding folly.

The Scornor

The scornor is mentioned 13 times in the book of Proverbs. It is from the Hebrew word *luwts* meaning to make mouths at, i.e. to scoff. Webster's dictionary defines the scornor as one who holds something in contempt or disdain. The scornor's biggest problem is that he disregards the counsel and instruction of his authority. He thinks their ways to be rather repulsive and intrusive and acts contemptibly toward them.⁵ Many teenagers struggle with being scornful. In a time of life when they are beginning to exert independence they often abhor intrusion by authority.

"It's my life, I can do what I want with it," or "I'm an adult now. You can't tell me what to do,"

⁵ "A Comprehensive Course in Effective Counseling, Part Two", Advanced Training Institute of America, Oak Brook, IL, 1993, Institute in Basic Life Principles, page 8

are some common phrases used by teenagers and young adults. The scorner often makes faces that show his disdain for authority.⁶ These are expressions of a scornful attitude that the wise man of Proverbs cautions against. “Surely he scorneth the scorners: but he giveth grace unto the lowly.” Proverbs 3:34

Perhaps the most identifying characteristic of a scorner is that they have an, "I don't care" attitude. The very definition of a scorner makes it clear that they hold life in disdain. They have no motivation to accomplish any tasks. Since they are their own boss they accomplish tasks when they are “in the mood” or “feel like it.” Scorners are also lazy people. The book of Proverbs speaks much about the scornful or the slothful. There are two Hebrew words used in Proverbs for the scornful and the slothful. The first word, *r@miyah* refers to one who does work, but does a sloppy job with an attitude of indifference. “The slothful [man] roasteth not that which he took in hunting: but the substance of a diligent man [is] precious” Proverbs 12:27. The work that they do often needs to be redone and requires close supervision. “The hand of the diligent shall bear rule: but the slothful shall be under tribute.” Proverbs 12:24 The scorner will always be a *r@miyah* because it is indigenous to his character. He will not live up to his full potential because he lacks the motivation to apply himself to tasks. The second Hebrew term referring to the sluggard or slothful is *atsel*. The *atsel* is the man who just does not work. He always has an excuse for not working, sleeps a lot, and is described in Proverbs as so indolent that he won't even take his hand out of his pocket to feed himself (Proverbs 26:13-15). Slothfulness and sluggishness are the two most significant characteristics of the scorner. The scorner makes for a difficult student and a terrible employee. (It is interesting to note that the Psalmist warns against sitting in the seat of the scornful in Psalm 1:1. Although the context of the verse does not reference laziness, it is interesting to note that the scorner is continually sitting as the term “sitteth” implies.)

6 “A Comprehensive Course in Effective Counseling, Part Two”, page 8

The scorner's biggest problem is that he is not teachable. He refuses to receive instruction from anyone. He can't accept correction because he hates the corrector. "Reprove not a scorner lest he hate thee:" Proverbs 9:8. He has no ability to grasp wisdom because he completely disdains his parents. "A wise son heareth his father's instruction: but a scorner heareth not rebuke" Proverbs 13:1.⁷ In order to avoid the negative consequences of living a life of scorn he must learn to receive instruction. This will require a complete change of heart (attitude) on the part of the scorner. "My son, give me thine heart,..." Proverbs 23:26.

Proverbs is careful to give instruction concerning the proper way to deal with a scorner. While the simple require structure and accountability, the scorner requires harshness and isolation. Since the simple are so impressionable, authorities are commanded to deal harshly with the scorner to deter the simple ones from following their example. "Smite the scorner and the simple will beware:" Proverbs 19:25. Since the simple are still able to receive instruction they are able to receive a more purposeful discipline when they are in error. However, the scorner is unable to receive instruction. Therefore, his discipline will be carried out with the intent of setting him as an example to the simple of what will happen to them if they follow in the scorners footsteps.

Not only are scorners to be dealt with harshly, but they are also to be disassociated with. It seems that contention follows the scorner wherever he goes. Since he is unteachable, lazy, and disdains all authority, he will cause problems wherever he goes. That is why he is often fired from work, suspended from school, or barred from many different types of events. "Cast out the scorner, and contention shall go out; yea, strife and reproach shall cease" Proverbs 22:10. Psalm 1:1 warns against fellowshiping with the scorner. The scorner appears to have an ability to drag others into scorning with him, and therefore should be avoided.

The Fool

⁷ "A Comprehensive Course in Effective Counseling, Part Two", page 9

When a person is identifiable as a scorner, they find themselves in a position that is not favorable in the light of Scripture. There is, however, only one other characterization that a person could match that would be worse than that of a scorner. This characterization is that of a fool. The English translation of the book of Proverbs translates three different Hebrew words as “fool”. The three words are: *eviyl*, *keciyl*, and *nabal*. Each of these “fools” will be characterized. Bill Gothard, in his *Comprehensive Course in Effective Counseling* identifies five types of fools. He renders the three Hebrew terms for fool as the silly fool, the sensual fool, and the steadfast fool, respectively. He also adds the simple fool (*pithy*) and the scornful fool (*luwts*).⁸ Both the simple and the scorner⁹ have been addressed already and will not be revisited in this section.

The term *eviyl* could be translated silly and it is from an unused root meaning to be perverse. *Effective Counseling* defines it as the following:

The Hebrew word for “silly fool” is *eviyl* (ev-EEL), which means “one who has morally missed the mark.” His curiosity and rejection of parental authority have caused him to violate his moral purity.¹⁰

The term *keciyl* could be translated as fat in the connotation of being stupid or silly. The *keciyl* fool is thick headed and bent on doing foolishness. *Effective Counseling* describes him as, “One who fails to receive the correction of parents or public authorities or reacts to it.”¹¹

The term *nabal* could be translated as a stupid person or one who is a wicked and vile person. This type of fool is one who has completely rejected wisdom and embraced folly. *Effective Counseling* relates the term to, “...one who is morally wicked, who despises holiness and is a disgrace to his family and to all those who have tried to help him.”

The fool's greatest problem is his heart condition. Psalm 14:1 and Psalm 53:1 both make the

8 “A Comprehensive Course in Effective Counseling, Part Two”, pages 6-9

9 The scorner is considered by Mr. Gothard as a type of fool and by Mr. Deffinbaugh as the worst type of fool. It is discussed separately because it is always translated as scorner and never as fool, although it is used in parallel with fool in the Proverbs.

10 “A Comprehensive Course in Effective Counseling, Part Two”, page 7

11 “A Comprehensive Course in Effective Counseling, Part Two”, page 7

same commentary concerning the fool (*nabal*) – he has said in his heart that there is no God. The key to understanding this verse is the phrase “in his heart”. It is not that the fool has necessarily defamed the existence of God with his mouth, but that he has rejected God's authority over him internally. Matthew Henry states it well in his commentary on Psalm 53:1:

They cannot doubt of the being of God, but will question his dominion. He says this in his heart; it is not his judgment, but his imagination. He cannot satisfy himself that there is none, but he wishes there were none, and pleases himself with the fancy that it is possible there may be none. He cannot be sure there is one, and therefore he is willing to think there is none. He dares not speak it out, lest he be confuted, and so undeceived, but he whispers it secretly in his heart, for the silencing of the clamours of his conscience and the emboldening of himself in his evil ways.¹²

Charles Spurgeon, in his *Treasury of David*, refers to this as practical atheism.¹³ An atheism that is not theoretically opposed to God, but for all practical purposes denies the existence of God through lifestyle. Chapters 14 and 53 of Psalms goes on to describes the extreme wickedness of these fools. No wonder the wise man commands to, “Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it [are] the issues of life” Proverbs 4:23. The fool should listen to the beckoning of wisdom when she says, “My son, give me thine heart, and let thine eyes observe my ways” Proverbs 23:26.

There are two causes of folly in the life of a person. The first is a conscious rejection of wisdom. Simply put, the fool hates knowledge (Proverbs 1:20-29; 10:23; 13:19; and 29:27). The second is that he follows his heart (Proverbs 28:26). Because he rejects wisdom he turns to his own heart for counsel. However, the heart of man is desperately wicked and will always lead one into folly (Jeremiah 17:9). The fool cannot be taught or reformed. There are no group therapies or twelve step programs for the fool. He must have a change of heart toward wisdom brought

¹² Henry, Matthew, *Matthew Henry's Concise Commentary*, [CD-ROM] (Lewisville, TX: Accelerated Christian Education, 2002)

¹³ Spurgeon, Charles, *Treasury of David*, [CD-ROM] (Lewisville, TX: Accelerated Christian Education, 2002)

about by a fear of the LORD.¹⁴

The Prudent

When the simple is at the crossroads of his life he will lean toward wisdom or folly. The first step in the path toward wisdom away from folly is prudence. The King James Version translates the word prudent or prudence in Proverbs from five different Hebrew words: *biyn*, *aram*, *aruwm*, *sakal*, and *ormah*. These words are synonyms that refer to one who is cunning, subtle, circumspect, or able to discern situations. It is occasionally translated as wisdom. Webster's dictionary defines prudence as, "The ability to govern and discipline oneself by the use of reason; skills and good judgment in the use of resources; caution or circumspection as to the danger or risk." Simply put, prudence is common sense in action.

The prudent is marked by several characteristics. The prudent person is one who will examine the facts and discern the truth. He is contrasted with the simple person who is gullible. "The simple believeth every word: but the prudent man looketh well to his going" Proverbs 14:15. The prudent person is willing to be corrected when he is wrong so that he can learn from his mistakes. "A fool despiseth his father's instruction: but he that regardeth reproof is prudent" Proverbs 15:5. The prudent will abstain from the appearance of evil. Proverbs 22:3 and 27:12 both state that, "A prudent man forseeth the evil and hideth himself: but the simple pass on, and are punished." In commenting on this passage, Matthew Henry stresses the fact that, "Evil may be foreseen."¹⁵ If one is paying attention he can foresee what is down the road. The average young person knows that most unchaperoned high school or college parties will involve drinking, drugs, illicit sex, etc. If he becomes involved in any of these things because he attended a party, it will not be accidental involvement. The prudent young person would foresee the dangers of such

¹⁴ Deffinbaugh, Robert, page 36

¹⁵ Henry, Matthew, *Matthew Henry's Concise Commentary*

parties and avoid them. The prudent fisherman pays attention to the weather forecast and does not go out to see if there is a chance he will be caught in a dangerous storm. In commenting on Proverbs 27:12, J. Vernon McGee states that an underlying message of this verse is, “Buy insurance.”¹⁶ The prudent person is careful to plan for what might be in store for the future.

While the scorner is slothful and sluggish, the prudent is just the opposite. The prudent person has a tendency toward diligence. Diligence refers to thoroughness (Proverbs 21:5), quality (Proverbs 12:27), focus (Proverbs 27:23), and thoughtfulness (Proverbs 21:5) in accomplishing tasks.

One thing that must be understood about prudence is that it is not wisdom. Proverbs 8:12 makes it clear that prudence is related to wisdom, but prudence itself is not wisdom. There are two reasons for this conclusion. The first is that the unsaved can be prudent by using their God-given abilities. There are many successful people in the world who have gained much knowledge and understanding in the affairs of life who have not come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. They may be some of the most heathen people in the world, but they have exhibited prudence. This is also why Christians can still seek counsel from their non-Christian parents concerning earthly matters and be blessed for honoring that counsel. This is because unsaved people can be prudent. The second reason that prudence is not wisdom is related to the first. The unsaved cannot be wise because of wisdom's Source. The source of all wisdom is Jesus Christ. Without a personal relationship with Jesus Christ a person can be prudent, but never wise.

The Wise

The final person of Proverbs to be discussed is the wise person. Since the wise person is characterized by wisdom it is important to have a working definition of wisdom. Wisdom is

¹⁶ McGee, J. Vernon, *Thru the Bible Commentary Series*, Proverbs, Nashville, Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1991, Page 229

translated from several Hebrew words, but the predominant Hebrew word in the book of Proverbs for wisdom is *chokma*. Some of the other Hebrew words translated as wisdom have alternative meanings, but *chokma* is uniquely wisdom. Wisdom is defined by Webster's dictionary as, “accumulated philosophic or scientific learning: knowledge: ability to discern inner qualities and relationships: insight: good sense: judgment: a wise attitude or course of action: the teachings of the ancient men.” It provides sense as a synonym for wisdom, referring to common sense. This is quite a range of definitions for wisdom, yet not one of them is adequate for defining the wisdom of Proverbs. It is true that Webster's definitions would be adequate for describing humanistic wisdom, but it falls far short when referring to Biblical wisdom. Understanding the Bible's definition of wisdom will require a closer analysis of what Proverbs has to say on the subject.

“If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all [men] liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him” James 1:5. Burkitt makes three observations concerning this passage: 1. Every man lacks wisdom. 2. Anyone who wants wisdom must go to God for it. 3. God gives wisdom liberally and does not withhold it.¹⁷ These three observations accurately note that man is devoid of wisdom, God is the source of wisdom, and God desires to abundantly impart wisdom to men. This is moving closer to what Biblical wisdom is truly.

Understanding the wisdom of Proverbs requires an analysis of the eighth chapter of the book. In this chapter wisdom is personified. It is understood that wisdom is a divine attribute, but this eighth chapter of Proverbs personifies wisdom. The personification of wisdom is in the feminine gender, but the overriding aspect of the chapter is that it is personified. An analysis of this personification reveals that this Person of wisdom is Jesus Christ.¹⁸ As J. Vernon McGee states,

¹⁷ Burkitt, William, *William Burkitt's Expository Notes on the New Testament*, [CD-ROM] (Lewisville, TX: Accelerated Christian Education, 2002)

¹⁸ Henry, Matthew, *Matthew Henry's Concise Commentary*

“The One in this book whose wisdom it is, is none other than the LORD Jesus Christ.”¹⁹ The comparison of the attributes of the personified wisdom bear striking similarities to the personification of the *Logos* or Word in Christ in the New Testament.²⁰ Since Christ is the embodiment of wisdom, there is no wisdom apart from Him.

Also, since Christ is the embodiment of wisdom it is He Who imparts wisdom. This is why James tells us that man does not have wisdom on his own and if he desires it he must ask it of God. Since wisdom emanates from God and is obtained from God, He has established a perimeter for obtaining it. “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom: and the knowledge of the holy is understanding.” Proverbs 9:10. Wisdom begins with the fear of Yahweh. Matthew Henry comments on the fear of the Lord as the prerequisite for obtaining any wisdom:

The heart must be principled with the fear of God; that is the beginning of wisdom. A reverence of God's majesty, and a dread of his wrath, are that fear of him which is the beginning, the first step towards true religion, whence all other instances of it take rise.²¹

Wisdom cannot exist apart from a proper relationship with God.

Since wisdom comes directly from Christ, and exists only in a proper relationship with Him, it is impossible for the unsaved to have the wisdom of Proverbs. Many unsaved people exhibit prudence, but unless their heart is filled with the fear of God and they have Christ dwelling in their heart by faith, they are not operating in wisdom. Proverbs 4:7 claims that wisdom (*chokmah*) is the priority of life. This is true, because the person who has found wisdom, has found Christ and obtained salvation for their soul.

The wise man of Proverbs is described with many characteristics. An exhaustive listing is not possible here, but a study of Proverbs will reveal that he responds in the grandest fashion possible. That is because the wise man responds to life just as Jesus would.

¹⁹ McGee, J. Vernon, page ix

²⁰ Bullock, C. Hassell, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Poetic Books*, Chicago, Moody Press, 1988, page 171

²¹ Henry, Matthew, *Matthew Henry's Concise Commentary*

Conclusion

In this world there are many simple, many scorners, many fools, many prudent, but few wise. Proverbs characterizes all of them. Jesus said that a person is known by their fruits. “Even a child is known by his doings, whether his work be pure, and whether it be right,” Proverbs 20:11. The five people of Proverbs can all be identified by their behavior. Identifying them will help the believer to evangelize them, encourage them, and respond to them in wisdom.

The writer of Proverbs seeks to encourage all to strive for wisdom, but wisdom cannot be attained apart from a right relationship with God. The best thing for a simple person, scorners, fool, or prudent person is to be in right standing with God through Jesus Christ, Who is Wisdom. The book of Proverbs points all men to Jesus.

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