

Wisdom from Proverbs The Fool's Gallery

Intro: In my travels I've had the privilege of visiting some world class museums (New York Metropolitan, British Museum in London, Museum of Fine Arts in Vienna, Austria). In such places you can roam gallery after gallery of paintings from great artists of the past. Often those galleries would give the artist's rendering of famous people or events. Benches are strategically placed before the great work so that the viewer can simply sit down and carefully take it all in and learn the unique features of each artist's work.

Tonight I want us to enter a gallery of another kind. Let's call it the gallery of fools. In the book of Proverbs, Solomon skillfully draws word pictures of various kinds of people in his attempts to make us wiser. Among those portraits is what might be called a gallery of fools. He invites us to walk through the room of "folly" and see Satan's work among men. One step in becoming wiser is identifying the characteristics of those who have embraced folly and avoid those characteristics. With that in mind let's consider:

Three portraits of folly

The simple or naïve

The Hebrew word is "peti" and conveys the idea of someone who is easily deceived or seduced. He is the person who is easily led, gullible, and silly.

The naïve believes everything, but the prudent man considers his steps. (Proverbs 14:15)

Mentally he is naïve; morally, he is irresponsible. Hence the "simple" is easy prey for temptation. The whole world is a joke and hence he never sees the seriousness of his choices of friends or company.

Folly is joy to him who lacks sense, but a man of understanding walks straight. (Proverbs 15:21)

Thus he spends his time pursuing what brings no real reward or blessing.

He who tills his land will have plenty of bread, but he who pursues vain things lacks sense. (Proverbs 12:11)

Thus, the naïve are easy targets for both those who are violent and the adulteress in particular (Prov. 7:6ff)

Finally the day of reckoning comes for the naïve person.

The prudent sees the evil and hides himself, but the naïve go on, and are punished for it. (Proverbs 22:3)

"For the waywardness of the naïve shall kill them, and the complacency of fools shall destroy them. (Proverbs 1:32)

Things are not totally hopeless for the simple or naïve. Sometimes they may learn from seeing the object lesson of someone more deeply involved in transgression.

Strike a scoffer and the naive may become shrewd, but reprove one who has understanding and he will gain knowledge. (Proverbs 19:25)
Sadly however if the simple or naïve does not learn to listen to wisdom he will advance to the next level of folly.

The naive inherit folly, but the prudent are crowned with knowledge. (Proverbs 14:18)

The fool

Let walk through the room and think about another person in the fool's gallery—this is the person Solomon simply calls “the fool”. There are three words in Proverbs that portray the fool.

“kesil” suggest someone who is dull and obstinate. This by the way was the Jewish name for the constellation “Orion” who is portrayed as having foolishly chased women.

“ewil” suggests someone who is stupid and stubborn.

“nabal” suggests someone who is because of ignorance and stubbornness also boorish in their treatment of others.

Remember that Abigail, the wife of Nabal, the OT character, commented that her husband truly lived up to his name (fool), for she said, “he is such a worthless man that no one can speak to him” (1 Sam. 25:17).

Marks of the fool

Though the truth is quite available to him, he has his mind everywhere else.

Wisdom is in the presence of the one who has understanding, but the eyes of a fool are on the ends of the earth. (Proverbs 17:24)

If his mind ever turns to what is true and right, he quickly abandons what he has learned.

Why is there a price in the hand of a fool to buy wisdom, when he has no sense? (Proverbs 17:16)

Or as Solomon later put it:

Like a thorn which falls into the hand of a drunkard, so is a proverb in the mouth of fools.

What might have given him wise guidance turns out to be just another source of affliction.

Solomon portrays this fool as a menace to society; a shame to his parents. And no matter how much pain he causes them he has not qualms about it. He still despises them:

A wise son makes a father glad, but a foolish man despises his mother. (Proverbs 15:20)

The fool is known for his moral insolence. He has a flippant outlook toward sin:

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

And unless it is removed from early in life through discipline, it is almost impossible to eradicate folly from the person

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

Sometimes we forget how deeply ingrained bad character becomes. Even when the fool suffers for bad conduct he can't resist going back into it.

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

These words take folly to the next level. If the simple person is "naïve and unaware of the lurking dangers around him, then this person is a willing participant in sin. He enjoys it and refuses to see the consequences of his actions upon himself and others. Because of his stubbornness he entrenches himself in immorality.

The scoffer

Translates the Hebrew word "lets". He is the active advocate of folly. He not only participates in evil himself; he is evil's advocate against God and truth.

He too greatly dislikes correction; but in his case, your correction will be met with active hostility.

He who corrects a scoffer gets dishonor for himself, and he who reproves a wicked man gets insults for himself. Do not reprove a scoffer, lest he hate you, reprove a wise man, and he will love you. (Proverbs 9:7-8)

His actions are rooted in arrogance:

"Proud," "Haughty," "Scoffer," are his names, who acts with insolent pride. (Proverbs 21:24)

He will cause conflict and trouble wherever he appears:

Drive out the scoffer, and contention will go out, even strife and dishonor will cease. (Proverbs 22:10)

Scorners set a city aflame, but wise men turn away anger. (Proverbs 29:8)

And his active participation in evil and his inflammatory rhetoric makes him an abomination to others.

The devising of folly is sin, and the scoffer is an abomination to men. (Proverbs 24:9)

He will often have to pay the price for his crimes against society:

Judgments are prepared for scoffers, and blows for the back of fools. (Proverbs 19:29)

But his worst judgment will come directly from the Lord he scoffs:

Though He scoffs at the scoffers, yet He gives grace to the afflicted. (Proverbs 3:34)

Observations about folly

Let's sit somewhere and makes some observations

First we can see that there is a progression. These are three portraits of the same person over time. Solomon has drawn three portraits that describe folly in its development.

People start out naïve and misled usually as young people unaware of the lurking dangers of sin.

Through participation in sin they may become attracted, entrenched and comfortable in unrighteousness.

Finally, they fear no consequence and mock God and scoff at truth.

It might be good to remember when we start down that road that sin often takes us much further than we ever intended to go!

Second we can see that folly is not so much about intellect as choice.

Though the fool might in some sense be called ignorant or dull, it is not an ignorance or dullness inherent in mental capacities. It is the ignorance of choice. It is about moral capacity.

For years Psalm 14:1 puzzled me: “The fool has said in his heart, ‘There is no god’”. Yet most of the people who say that are typically some of the smartest people on the planet. I became aware that unbelief and the folly it produces is not a mental problem; it’s a moral problem. People often align themselves with philosophies that justify the behavior they desire to practice! Thus, the psalmist continues to describe this fool:

The Lord has looked down from heaven upon the sons of men, to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God. They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one. (Psalm 14:2-3)

Third we can see that the choice of folly has a high price; it brings misery and death to oneself as well as others.

Satan promises the naïve so much; he assures them at sin will bring independence of all others, freedom, pleasure. You’ll be your own man and different from all the rest!

For whatever pleasure sin may bring the ultimate destination of the fool is personal destruction and grief to all who are around him/her. It is important to remember that folly (sin) brings its own punishment to those who practice it and there is a point of no return where one must simply face the consequences of a sinful life without remedy (Prov. 1:24-33).

Conclusion: We could have taken a stroll through another gallery—the wise man’s gallery and been impressed with the humility, joy, and life of the godly man. But for tonight, let’s let the pictures of folly impress upon us the sad condition of those who choose a life of sin. Let’s learn to identify in ourselves any tendencies in this direction and let the fear of the Lord keep us away from such a life. There are no pretty pictures in the fools gallery.