

Series in Proverbs.

There are two paths in life, and upon these paths different kinds of people walk. According to Jesus, one path is quite narrow and leads to life, while the other is broad and ends in death.

Proverbs tells us more about the people who walk these paths. We find the wise and the fool walking their respective paths. We also read about another kind of person, the simple who stand at life's greatest crossroad uncertain which path to take.

To every man there openeth
A Way, and Ways, and a Way,
And the High Soul climbs the High Way,
And the Low Soul gropes the Low,
And in between, on the misty flats,
The rest drift to and fro.
But to every man there openeth
A High Way, and a Low.
And every man decideth
The Way his soul shall go.¹

Solomon would have agreed. Proverbs is a practical book that sees three basic kinds of people—the wise, the fool, and the simple. The wise climb the High Way, while the foolish grope the Low, and in the spirit of this poem, it's the simple who drift to and fro.

Wise people generally make good decisions, but did you know that foolish people often do as well? You don't have to be a Christian to read Proverbs or apply a few principles from it. The mark between wisdom and folly is what a person does with God and His Word.

The decisions made by a wise person flow from a humble reverence before God. A fool may make the exact same decision, but in his heart, he's self-sufficient. *Why look to God? Why read the Bible? Isn't it obvious what I should do?* A fool in the sight of God is a person who's fine on his own (Psa 14:1). The simple—they aren't reverent before God or defiance against Him, they're ignorant. They're simple. Not knowing what they should do, they can be swayed.

Ultimately, all of us are on one of two paths. The simple may be committed to neither, but no one remains simple forever. In time, the simple either harden as clay or soften as wax before the light of God and His Word.

THE SIMPLE

The Lord didn't choose wise men to be His disciples, but He didn't choose a group of fools, either. With the exception of Judas, these men were simple. At least, for the first year of Jesus' ministry, even the crowds who followed Him could be described as simple, and Jesus had compassion on them (Matt 9:36).

The disciples, like everyone else, understood God and His Word through the lens provided by the Pharisees. They had never heard it was good to do good on the Sabbath (John 5:1-17), or that blindness wasn't a mark of God's judgment (John 9:3). Never had they thought that God wanted to save Gentiles or that He loved Samaritans (John 4; Luke 9:54). They had been taught a religion of self-righteousness. It was all about earning God's favor.

As a result, so many misunderstandings occurred during those three years of ministry with Jesus. Perhaps the most significant day prior to the last supper was when He fed the 5,000 families (John 6). Some 20,000 people followed Jesus believing that He was about to conquer Rome and bless them with free food forevermore. They envisioned a divine welfare state and rushed to make Jesus their king (John 6:15). Jesus, however, refused and went to be alone.

The Lord soon corrected their wrong ideas about Him, and when He did, that vast crowd went from simply ignorant to defiantly foolish. They began to mock Jesus: *What do you mean there's no more food?! What kind of messiah are you?!* You can read it yourself in John 6, but what belief that crowd had in Jesus proved false when they turned and left Him.

As for the disciples, they struggled greatly. They were as ignorant as the crowds with all the same messianic expectations. Jesus' actions and words made no sense, and yet, they humbly trusted Him saying: "You have the words of eternal life. We have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God" (John 6:68-69).

The disciples could have left at any moment, but they kept coming back to learn more from the Son of God. The more they learned, the more they grew from being ignorantly simple to reverently wise.

Proverbs was written with the simple in mind, because there's hope that they might listen (Prov 1:4). The simple don't see the value of wisdom or sense an urgency to acquire it (Prov 1:20-22), and like

Three Kinds of People

a child, they can be persuaded one way or the other (Prov 14:15). Some of them, however, develop a hunger to become wise. Others respond similar to the crowd who liked Jesus for a time and turned away.

Children don't remain children forever, do they? They grow up, and so do the simple. In time, they will either humble themselves before the Lord or turn away from Him. They will either turn from their sin and come to Christ, or do what seems right in their own eyes.

THE FOOLISH

It's been said by many that it's better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to speak and remove all doubt. How true! Proverbs 17:28 affirms this, but the chief mark of a fool isn't his pattern of speech. The chief mark is his pride. A fool hasn't the sense to stand in fear of the Living God (Prov 1:7). It doesn't matter to a fool who God is or what God supposedly said in some old book. All that matters to him is his own opinions, and he loves to air them (Prov 29:11).

Pharaoh had many opportunities to humble himself, but each time his heart hardened against God. He was the great king of Egypt, worshipped and feared as deity. It was laughable to Pharaoh that the God of the Hebrews would dare order him to do anything. "Who is the Lord, that I should obey His voice and let Israel go?" (Ex 5:2). He found out soon enough, and his defiance was devastating.

The king of Egypt had numerous opportunities to turn from his ways, but he continued in them. The same could be said of King Saul who failed to obey the prophet Samuel (1 Sam 15) or of Judas who rejected Jesus (Matt 26:14-16). It wasn't just one minor infraction that suddenly made these men fools. They were already walking the wrong path long before these instances. As time and truth go hand-in-hand, their disdain for God eventually rose to the surface for all to finally see.

THE WISE

Noah wasn't chosen for his brilliance, but for being a righteous man who walked with God (Gen 6:9). His decision to build the ark may have been the greatest act of faith mentioned in Scripture. For 120 years, Noah labored daily to build a ship on dry land, and he kept preaching to any who would listen (2 Pet 2:5). Ten years rolled by and then twenty or thirty as he aged. Soon a half century of his life had been spent. There was no rain. He had no followers. All Noah had was God's word, and he obeyed with nothing more than that.

Proverbs 4:18—"But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, which shines brighter and brighter until full day."

The path of righteousness is the same path as wisdom (Prov 4:11). Those who walk uprightly before God are wise, and those who are wise walk uprightly. Noah's wisdom can be seen in his consistent obedience. He kept cutting wood, hammering nails, warning the region for more than a century before anything happened... but something did happen. The earth flooded, the foolish were judged, and wisdom was vindicated.

WISDOM IS ALWAYS VINDICATED WITH TIME.

Wisdom is the skill of living life, and the only sure way to gain that skill is by humbling oneself before the God who created it. Turn from your ways and thinking; turn to His Son for salvation. Do this, walk wisely from one day to the next, and yours will be a life that shines brighter and brighter to the end. Wise people age well (Prov 16:31); fools don't. For the wise, their best years are often yet to come, and if not in this life, then in the next at rest with the Lord.

There are only three types of people in the world. The wise humbly walk wisdom's path created by God, while fools defiantly reject God to plow their own path. The simple may not be walking anywhere at first, but eventually they grow to become set on one path or the other.

¹ John Oxenham, "The Way".